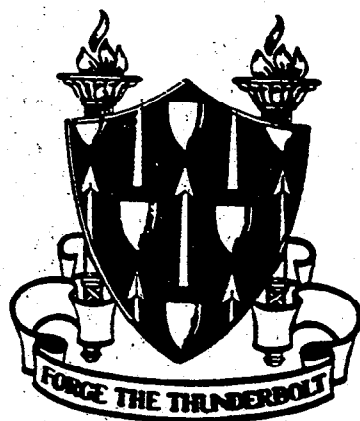


THE BATTLE AT ST. VITH, BELGIUM

17-23 DECEMBER 1944



**AN HISTORICAL EXAMPLE OF
ARMOR IN THE DEFENSE**

THE US ARMY ARMOR SCHOOL

GENERAL ORDERS)
NO. 43)

DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
Washington 25, D.C., 19 December 1950

EXTRACT

* * *
7TH ARMORED DIVISION

Hq & Hq Co, 7th Armd Div
Combat Command A, Hq & Hq Co
Combat Command B, Hq & Hq Co
Reserve Command, Hq & Hq Co
17th Tank Battalion
23d Armd Inf Bn
31st Tank Battalion
33d Armd Engr Bn
38th Armd Inf Bn
40th Tank Battalion
48th Armd Inf Bn
87th Cav Rcn Sq (Mecz)
147th Signal Co
Hq & Hq Btry, 7th Armd Div Arty
434th Armd FA Bn
440th Armd FA Bn
489th Armd FA Bn
Hq & Hq Co, 7th Armd Div Trains
77th Armd Med Bn
129th Ord Maint Bn
Band, 7th Armd Div
MP Platoon, 7th Armd Div
(Attached nondivisional units are
listed in par. 4a.)

CITED IN THE ORDER OF THE DAY
of the Belgian Army, in Decree No. 7253,
13 July 1950, by Charles, Prince of Belgium,
Regent of the Kingdom, with the following
citation:

During the crucial period of the German
offensive of the Ardennes, in 1944, the
American 7th Armored Division, attacked by
enemy forces estimated at eight divisions,
among them 3 SS Panzer and 2 Panzer Divi-
sions, held the important center of Saint
Vith, preventing any advance and any exploi-
tation on this main line, thus dooming the
German offensive to frustration and, by its
sacrifice, permitting the launching of the
Allied counteroffensive.

CITED IN THE ORDER OF THE DAY
of the Belgian Army, in Decree No. 7253,
13 July 1950, by Charles, Prince of Belgium,
Regent of the Kingdom, with the following
citation:

Passing over to the attack on 20 January
in the Saint Vith sector where it had fought
previously, the 7th Armored Division pushed
the enemy out of the position that it had been
organizing for two weeks, and pushed it with-
out respite seven kilometers beyond the Belgian
frontier, inflicting heavy losses on this enemy.
During these nine days it captured more than
one thousand prisoners.

BELGIAN FOURRAGERE (1940), awarded by
Decree No. 7253, 13 July 1950, by Charles,
Prince of Belgium, Regent of the Kingdom.

* * *
BY ORDER OF THE SECRETARY OF THE ARMY:

OFFICIAL:

EDWARD F. WITSELL
Major General, USA
The Adjutant General

J. LAWTON COLLINS
Chief of Staff, United States Army

FOREWORD OF 1966

Nearly twenty-two years ago this battle was fought as the result of a surprise attack on the Western Front. Since then the details have gradually unfolded and the Battle of the Bulge is now held in better perspective.

Twenty-two years later five United States divisions plus other NATO troops are along the Iron Curtain in Europe facing a Russian force that could launch another such surprise attack without build up. If such should occur, the pattern of the battle could well follow this one . . . surprise, cut off units, bad weather, short supply to some units, cut communications, loss of contact to the right and left and to the rear, and the other confusions of a modern fluid battle. For these reasons the study of this battle is of value to the officer student.

Bruce C. Clarke

BRUCE C. CLARKE

General, United States Army (Retired)

Formerly Commanding General,
Seventh United States Army, and

Formerly Commander in Chief,
United States Army Europe

Editor's Note:

General von Manteuffel has agreed at several joint press conferences that for the German counter-offensive of December 1944 to be successful at least three things had to happen:

- a. The German attack had to be a surprise.
- b. The weather to be such as to prevent strikes by allied aircraft on the German columns coming through the Ardennes.
- c. The progress of the German main effort through and beyond St. Vith must be rapid and not delayed.

Requirements a. and b. were met. Requirement c. was not met because of the defensive and delaying action of the 7th Armored Division and attached troops in the St. Vith area from 17-23 December 1944.

His timetable called for the capture of St. Vith by 1800 hours on 17 December. He did not capture it until the night of 21 December and did not control the St. Vith area until 23 December when CCB withdrew on order.

On 22 December 1964, at a press conference in Watertown, New York, General von Manteuffel stated "on the evening of 24 December 1944, I recommended to Hitler's Adjutant that the German Army give up the attack and return to the West Wall." He stated that the reason for this recommendation was due to the time lost by his Fifth Panzer Army in the St. Vith area. Hitler did not accept von Manteuffel's recommendation.

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THE BATTLE AT ST. VITH, BELGIUM
17-23 December 1944

**A HISTORICAL EXAMPLE
OF
ARMOR IN THE DEFENSE**

**Prepared by
The US Army Armor School**

(3d Printing)

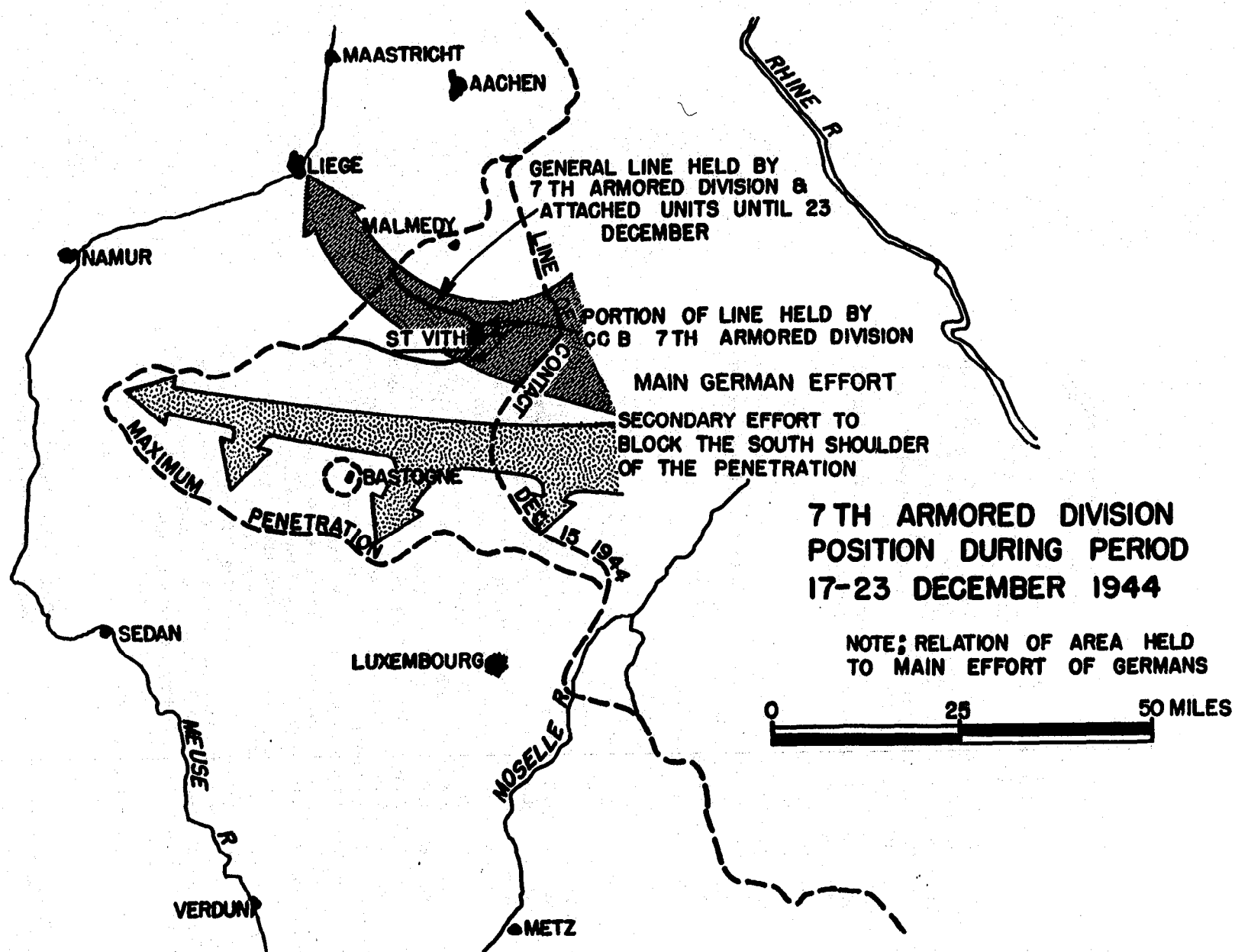


Figure 1.

GENERAL ORDERS }
No. 48

DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
WASHINGTON 25, D. C., 12 July 1948

BATTLE HONORS—Citation of unit.----- II
* * * * *

II. BATTLE HONORS.—As authorized by Executive Order 8396 (sec. I, Bul. 22, WD, 1943), superseding Executive Order 9075 (sec. III, Bul. 11, WD, 1942), the following unit is cited under the provisions of AR 260-15 in the name of the President of the United States as public evidence of deserved honor and distinction. The citation reads as follows:

Combat Command B, 7th Armored Division, composed of the following units:
Headquarters and Headquarters Company;
17th Tank Battalion;
31st Tank Battalion;
23d Armored Infantry Battalion;
38th Armored Infantry Battalion;
87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, Mechanized (less Troop D);
275th Armored Field Artillery Battalion;
434th Armored Field Artillery Battalion;
965th Field Artillery Battalion;
168th Engineer Combat Battalion;
3d Platoon, Company F, 423d Infantry Regiment;
Company B, 33d Armored Engineer Battalion; and
Company A, 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion (SP),

is cited for outstanding performance of duty in action from 17 to 23 December 1944, inclusive, at St. Vith, Belgium. *Combat Command B, 7th Armored Division*, was subjected to repeated tank and infantry attacks, which grew in intensity as the German forces attempted to destroy the stubborn defenses that were denying to them the use of the key communication center at St. Vith. By the second day, the flanks were constantly threatened by enemy forces that had bypassed the St. Vith area and pushed far to the rear in an effort to encircle the command east of the Salm River. The attacking forces were repeatedly thrown back by the gallant troops who rose from their fox holes and fought in fierce hand-to-hand combat to stop the penetrations and inflict heavy losses on the numerically superior foe. As the command continued to deny the important St. Vith highway and railroad center to the Germans, the entire offensive lost its initial impetus and their supply columns became immobilized. By 21 December, the German timetable was so disrupted that the enemy was forced to divert a corps to the capture of St. Vith. Under extreme pressure from overwhelming forces, this command, which for 6 days had held the St. Vith area so gallantly, was ordered to withdraw west of the Salm River. By their epic stand, without prepared defenses and despite heavy casualties, *Combat Command B, 7th Armored Division*, inflicted crippling losses and imposed great delay upon the enemy by a masterful and grimly determined defense in keeping with the highest traditions of the Army of the United States.

BY ORDER OF THE SECRETARY OF THE ARMY:

OFFICIAL:

EDWARD F. WITSELL
Major General
The Adjutant General

OMAR N. BRADLEY

Chief of Staff, United States Army

FOREWORD

Two of the most important tactical localities on the eighty-eight mile front held by the VIII Corps in the Ardennes Forest, at the beginning of the Battle of the Bulge, December 16, 1944, were Bastogne and St. Vith. Through these localities were the road nets which, if held, would disrupt the plan of any Aggressor. Bastogne was an important communications center and was worth the gamble made for its defense. Its garrison wrote a brilliant chapter in history by denying the locality to the enemy; therefore, much of the comment pertaining to the Battle of the Bulge has centered around this important terrain feature. This fact has caused many to lose sight of the importance of St. Vith and the gallant stand made for its defense by elements of Corps troops, by remnants of the 106th Division, and by CCB of the 7th Armored Division.

Realizing the importance of St. Vith to the American Forces, the Corps Commander directed the Commanding General of CCB, 7th Armored Division, to march his command to that locality, report to the Commanding General of the 106th Division, whose headquarters was there, and to assist in the defense of that important road center. In my opinion it was CCB which influenced the subsequent action and caused the enemy so much delay and so many casualties in and near this important area. Though armor was not designed primarily for the role of the defensive, the operation of CCB was nevertheless a good example of how it can assume such role in an emergency. Its aggressive defense measures completely disrupted the enemy's plan in the St. Vith sector . . .



TROY H. MIDDLETON
Lieutenant General (Retired)
Commanding General VIII Corps in
Europe

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INTRODUCTION¹

This is the narrative of one phase of the greatest pitched battle on the Western Front in World War II. The battle at ST. VITH (17-23 December 1944) is an excellent example of how American troops held their ground in the midst of confusion, defeat, and uncertainty; and thereby threw the German timetable sufficiently off schedule to allow American forces to regroup, hold, and then counterattack. The stand at ST. VITH has been recognized by both German and Allied commanders as a turning point in the Battle of the Bulge. General Eisenhower fully appreciated the time given to him by the defenders of ST. VITH when on 23 December he addressed all commanders in the defensive horseshoe: "The magnificent job you are doing is having a great beneficial effect on our whole situation. I am personally grateful to you and wish you would let all of your people know that if they continue to carry out their mission with the splendid spirit they have so far shown, they will have deserved well of their country."

The German plan for the ARDENNES counteroffensive is supposed to have been conceived by Hitler himself during the summer of 1944. The plan was not well received by the German generals (they had also been lukewarm to the ARDENNES offensive of 1940),² who felt that it was far too ambitious. It was not to be the *banzai* charge of a hopeless foe, however, but a well-planned and coordinated attack calculated to strike the American line in a relatively quiet sector with overwhelming force and to drive on to ANTWERP and BRUSSELS before countermeasures could be taken. The success of this plan might well have changed the entire course of the war. The academic questions as to the strategic soundness of this offensive, which were raised by German and Allied generals after the war, hold little interest to the men who were called upon to stand against overwhelming odds and turn back the onslaught. This story is concerned with the defense of the ST. VITH salient and will not deal with speculations as to the strategic expediency of the German plan.

To be successful, it was necessary for the German counteroffensive to be carried out with *surprise* and *speed*. As the record indicates, surprise was attained. "I told the Fuehrer on the first day of the attack that surprise had been completely achieved; the best indication was that no reinforcements were made in your sector before the attack," commented Colonel General Alfred Jodl after the war. "Just a local diversion," one American intelligence officer remarked after the first day. How our intelligence could so mistake an attack of some 17 divisions representing probably a total of 200,000 men is not our problem here; it is enough to say surprise was gained by the enemy.

The fact that speed was denied the enemy caused his defeat. The entire operation demanded that German spearheads be driven deep into the American rear installations, thus paralyzing the American ability and will to strike back. "I expected the right corps to capture ST. VITH on the first day of the attack, and hoped that in the evening of the second day of the attack its advance detachments would be engaged west of the SALM River and the bulk of its forces at VIELSALM," said Manteuffel, commander in chief of the *Fifth Panzer Army*.³ The Report of Operations, First US Army, points out:

"The elimination of the ST. VITH salient was of prime importance to the German C in C West. Because of the delay imposed here, the offensive was already three days behind schedule. In retrospect it can be said that almost from the second day of the offensive, von Rundstedt's plan began to go wrong."⁴

1 See figure 11 for road net and principal towns in the ST. VITH area.

2 Milton Shulman, *Defeat in the West* (Dutton and Company, Inc., N.Y. 1948).

Liddell Hart, *The German Generals Talk* (William Morrow & Company, N.Y. 1948).

3 German units are italicized throughout.

4 First US Army, Report of Operations (1 August 1944-22 February 1945).

According to the German Colonel General Jodl, "The title 'Rundstedt Offensive' is without foundation. That is not any reflection on von Rundstedt, but the plan was Hitler's. If any general should be identified with it, it is Model." (Field Marshal Walter Model, Commanding General, Army Group "B"—the *Fifth* and *Sixth SS Panzer Armies*, and the *Seventh Army* which conducted the offensive.)

Late on 16 December, German Field Marshal Model, commander of Army Group "B," ordered: "Quick exploitation of the successes of the first day of the attack is decisive. The first objective is to achieve liberty of movement for the mobile units."

The stubborn defense of ST. VITH contributed materially to delaying the enemy, and is credited as a major factor in the failure of the German main effort. The importance of the stand at ST. VITH is described in the First US Army Report of Operations:

"Without the communications center of ST. VITH, focal point of five main highways and three rail lines, the enemy's armored, infantry, and supply columns were all practically immobilized. The rugged, hilly terrain of the ARDENNES, heavily forested, permitted no cross-country movement. The few columns that were able to move, struggled along muddy, cratered, narrow secondary roads. Traffic was jammed bumper-to-bumper for miles from the original point of departure and provided excellent targets for our artillery and fighter bombers.¹ Also, lacking ST. VITH and its high ground the enemy could not launch his 'Operation Greif' in accordance with plan.

* * * * *

"The salient at ST. VITH not only threatened the whole of Fifth Panzer Army's northern flank, but continued to prevent the movement of Sixth SS Panzer Army. This afforded First US Army sufficient time to bring up reinforcements to a new defensive line. . . ."

* * * * *

THE FRONT ON 16 DECEMBER 1944

On the eve of the German attack, the First US Army held a 165-mile front, roughly from AACHEN to LUXEMBOURG. The Third US Army was on the south flank and the new Ninth US Army was on the north flank. The First US Army had three corps in the line—VII Corps in the north pushing toward the ROER, V Corps in the center probing towards the dams that controlled the waters of the ROER, and VIII Corps, commanded by Major General Troy Middleton, holding approximately a 90-mile front in the relatively quiet ARDENNES sector. The 2d and 99th Infantry Divisions held the south flank of V Corps, nearest VIII Corps. The gap between V and VIII Corps was held by the 14th Cavalry Group (Mechanized) under VIII Corps control. The VIII Corps sector front was held: in the north, by the 106th Infantry Division, which had just arrived in Europe and had not yet received its baptism of fire; in the center, by the 28th Infantry Division, whose front extended for 27 miles, east of BASTOGNE; and in the south, by units of the 9th Armored Division and 4th Infantry Division. See figure 2 for dispositions of Allied and enemy forces on 16 December 1944. (See also Allied order of battle, appendix I and German order of battle, appendix II.)

Although the sector was lightly held, it was considered improbable that a large-scale counterattack would be attempted over this terrain under winter conditions. General Eisenhower and General Bradley accepted the "calculated risk." It was not even rated as much of a gamble; the American front was offensive minded; the mental approach of all ranks was one of attack; no real action was anticipated here, hence the Allied portion of the line was not built up for attack. Intelligence reports of German troop concentrations were interpreted as an indication of a stiffer German defense. Our intelligence officers were optimists. Few seemed seriously to consider that the German had a "Sunday punch" left.

THE GERMAN STRIKE

As finally ordered, the German plan earmarked elements of 17 divisions for the first day's attack. To the north, Dietrich's Sixth SS Panzer Army sought to open a hole and to turn two SS panzer divisions of the I SS Panzer Corps loose for a dash to the MEUSE. The infantry of Dietrich's army collided head on with General Gerow's V Corps. The 99th US Infantry Division finally, on 19 December, fell back several thousand yards to the ELSENBORN Ridge; and there, with the help of the 26th Regimental Combat Team of the 1st Division, withstood all enemy attacks and formed an anchor on the line.

¹ The reference to fighter bombers in the Report of Operations, First US Army, refers to action after 23 December 1944. Because of weather conditions, there was almost no air activity from 17-22 December in the ST. VITH sector.

**DISPOSITION OF US AND
GERMAN TROOPS AT TIME
OFFENSIVE WAS LAUNCHED**
(SEE APPENDICES I AND II)

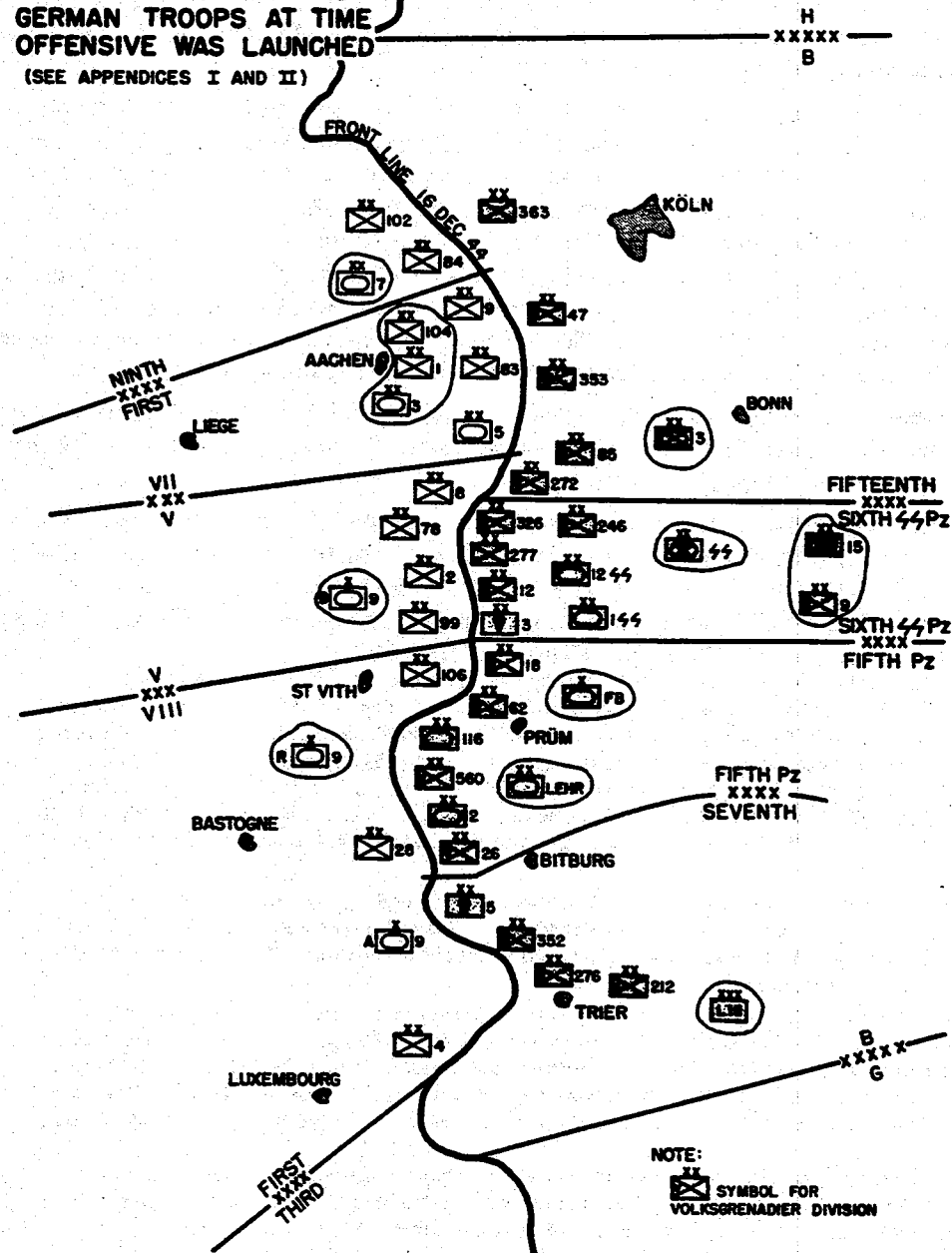


Figure 2.

South of the *Sixth SS Panzer Army*, the *Fifth Panzer Army*, under Manteuffel, planned to strike using tank-infantry teams with only light artillery preparations. The *LXVI Corps*, under Lt General Lucht, was to strike the 106th Infantry Division, isolate the SCHNEE EIFEL, and drive rapidly into ST. VITH. To the south the *LVIII* and *XLVII Corps* were to burst through the 28th Infantry Division, isolate BASTOGNE, and then drive on to the MEUSE with the panzer divisions. (See enemy order of battle, appendix II.)

The *Seventh Army*, under Brandenberger, was to push back the 4th Infantry Division, furnish flank protection, and stem any attempt to reinforce the battle area from the south. With this picture, it can be seen that the mailed fist was pointed, poised, and ready to strike. Let us see how the blow was received by the troops in the ST. VITH area.

On that bleak, cold morning of 16 December 1944, Germans from Manteuffel's *Fifth Panzer Army* sprang out of hiding in the dense forests of the ARDENNES and began a gigantic pincers movement around SCHNEE EIFEL, the large ridge mass about 16 miles due east of ST. VITH. Astride this ridge line were the 422d and 423d Regiments of the 106th US Infantry Division, which had landed in France less than two weeks prior to this time; this unit had been sent to the ARDENNES for a conditioning and seasoning program prior to heavy fighting. As the attack progressed, it became apparent that the Germans planned to by-pass the troops on SCHNEE EIFEL; cut them off; and converge upon ST. VITH. The American higher headquarters intended to counter by moving the 7th Armored Division into the area to assist in the restoration of the lines.

Major General A.W. Jones, commanding general of the 106th Infantry Division, moved Combat Command B of the 9th Armored Division south to assist the 424th Infantry, the regiment on the southern flank of the 106th Infantry Division.

On the 16th of December 1944, the 7th Armored Division with its attached troops, located east and northeast of HEERLEN, Holland, was in XIII Corps reserve. At 1730 it was alerted for early movement to VIII Corps in the vicinity of BASTOGNE, Belgium. The action taken is described by Brigadier General Bruce C. Clarke, commanding general of CCB, 7th Armored Division, who was to play a leading role in the defense of ST. VITH.

"At 2000 I received a telephone call from General Robert W. Hasbrouck, Commanding General, 7th Armored Division, saying that the division had received orders to march immediately south to BASTOGNE to report to the Commanding General of VIII Corps. What we were to do when we got to BASTOGNE was unknown. He told me that the division would march as soon as road clearances could be obtained. General Hasbrouck directed that I proceed immediately to BASTOGNE and report to the Commanding General, VIII Corps, to get information on the situation. He said that my combat command would lead the division on its march of some 60 to 70 miles south.

"At 0400, 17 December, Major Owen E. Woodruff, my S3, and I, with two drivers, were in BASTOGNE where we reported to General Middleton that the 7th Armored Division was marching south. I was told of the general situation and was told to go to ST. VITH at daylight and give the 106th Infantry Division help.

"At 1030 I was in ST. VITH where I learned the detailed situation. The Germans had attacked at daylight the day before. Two combat teams of the division were surrounded 7 or 8 miles to the east of ST. VITH. The other regiment had been hard hit. The situation to the north and south was hazy. Vehicles were streaming to the rear. Rumors of 'Tiger' tanks were prevalent. Contact with elements of the division was sporadic. There was an air of impending disaster.

"A radio message was sent to my combat command, which was leading the division on its march south, to report to me at ST. VITH. I later learned that the division had not started to move before 0500, 17 December, because it had been unable to obtain road clearance. I planned to counterattack and relieve the surrounded combat teams of the 106th Infantry Division, but traffic conditions prevented this action until it was too late."¹

1 From remarks by Brigadier General Bruce C. Clarke at ceremony at Fort Knox when the Distinguished Unit Citation was awarded to CCB of the 7th Armored Division for its action at ST. VITH; and from a manuscript prepared by General Clarke on the defense of ST. VITH.

The weather conditions on 16 December 1944, were typical of the weather which was to be experienced for the next seven days. "Overcast; cloudy; penetrating cold; snow flurries, turning to rain; poor aerial observation with no aerial activity; ground soft; roads muddy and slick," read the reports.

The terrain between SCHNEE EIFEL and the ARDENNES was rough, forested, and rocky. Frequent streams and numerous saddles added to the difficulties which channeled all vehicular traffic along the few narrow, tortuous roads which served the area. ST. VITH was one of the three key road junctions to the entire ARDENNES, and from it roads radiated to DINANT and LIEGE in the west and northwest; to MALMEDY and STAVELOT in the north; to HOUFFALIZE and BASTOGNE in the south; and to SCHONBURG and PRUM in the east. Through ST. VITH ran the only east-west railroad extending from the RHINE through the EIFEL and into the ARDENNES.

THE MARCH TO ST. VITH

On the morning of 17 December, when it had been thought that the 7th Armored Division would arrive in the ST. VITH area, the division was fighting clogged roads to the west rather than Germans. To reach the ST. VITH area, the 7th Armored Division moved in multiple columns over two routes (east and west), as shown in figure 3. The weather was rainy and the roads were a sea of mud; movement cross-country or in the fields alongside the roads was impossible. The division was alerted to move at 170200 December. It received orders to cross the initial point on the west route at 0330. The column was on the road when further orders were received to delay the movement one hour.¹

On the west route, the 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron led the way followed by CCB, CCA, 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion, Division (Main) Headquarters, 33d Armored Engineer Battalion, and Division Trains. Clearances on the east route were delayed until 170800 December when Reserve Command led off followed by Division (TAC) Headquarters, Division Artillery, and the 203d Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion. Trouble was encountered from the beginning; German aircraft were active over the HEERLEN area, more active than they had been for weeks. There had not been time for the proper dissemination of information and many staff officers and company commanders did not know their destination until their arrival in the ST. VITH area. Maps were not available, the mission was not known, and there had been little time to post the routes with guides.

The east route was cut by the enemy south of MALMEDY between Division (TAC) Headquarters and Division Artillery,² thus necessitating the artillery and the elements which followed to turn back and place themselves on the west route in rear of the troops already moving on that road. This was successfully accomplished, but resulted in considerable delay in the arrival of the artillery. Traffic on the west route continued to roll fairly well until noon of the 17th, when it was slowed by congestion resulting from the ever-thickening stream of friendly troops flowing west and northwest from the threatened POTEAU-UIELSALM-BEHO-ST. VITH area. Towards nightfall, the traffic congestion increased, and the 7th Armored Division column stretching from POTEAU through UIELSALM, TROIS PONTS, and STAVELOT to the north was brought to a complete standstill. The picture as described by Major Donald P. Boyer, Jr., S3, 38th Armored Infantry Battalion, gives some idea of the traffic conditions faced by the march columns as they tried to hasten to the defense of ST. VITH.

1 After Action Report, 7th Armored Division, 17 December 1944.

2 When the Germans cut this route they captured Battery B of the 285th Field Artillery Observation Battalion, which had worked its way into the march column of the 7th Armored Division. The artillerymen were lined up in a field by the crossroad and mowed down by machine-gun fire as they stood helpless with their hands over their heads. This was the infamous Malmedy Massacre. Colonel Church M. Matthews, the chief of staff of the 7th Armored Division, was killed at about this same time and place. Colonel John L. Ryan, Jr., who had been commanding the Reserve Command, was appointed chief of staff.

**ROUTES TO
VIELSALM-ST VITH AREA
7TH ARMD DIV
17 DEC 44**

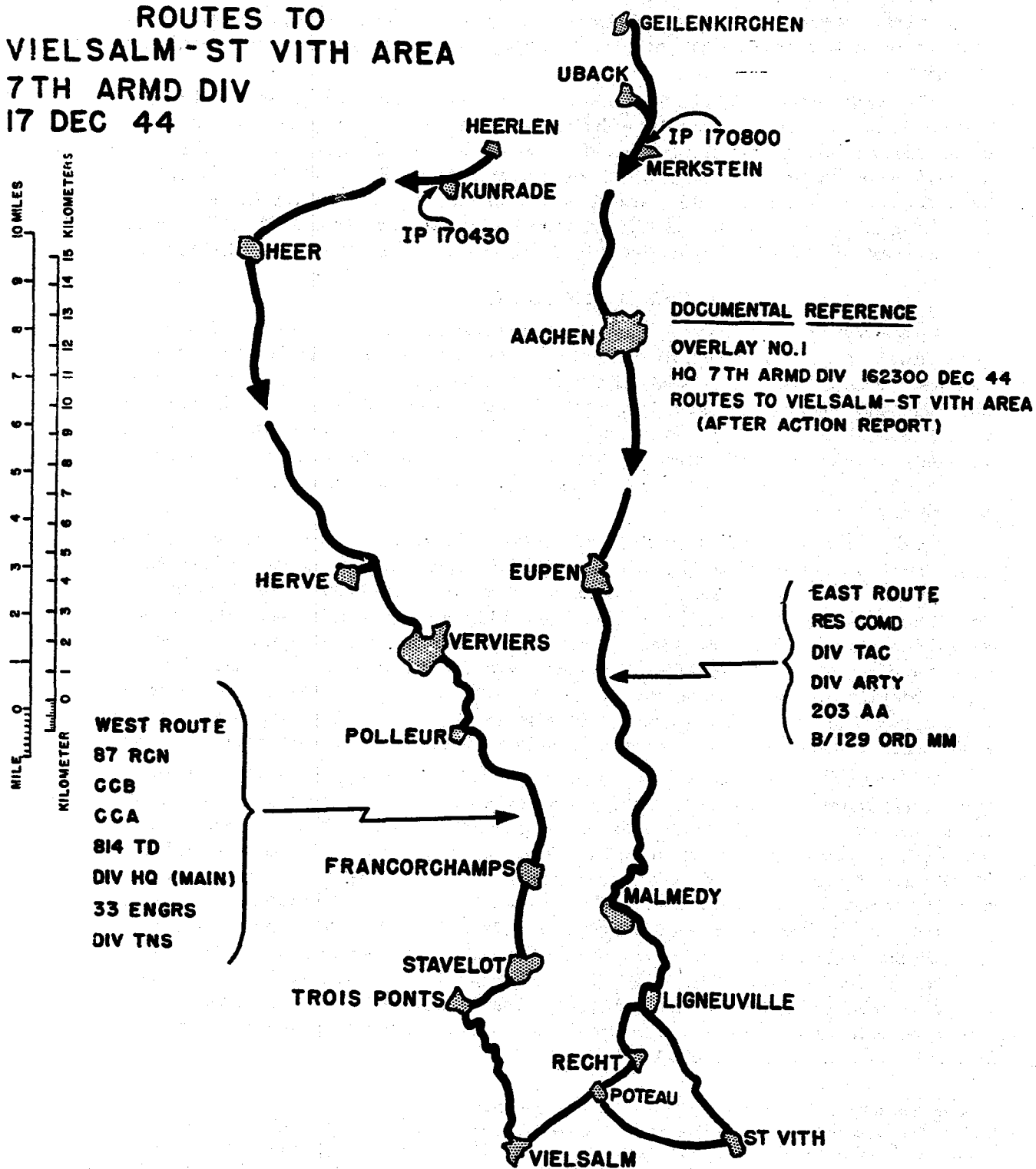


Figure 3.

"My driver and I arrived at the road junction at POTEAU at about 1230, 17 December. We were about an hour ahead of the 38th Armored Infantry Battalion which was the lead unit in the Reserve Command's march column. As we arrived at the road junction, we were hit by a sight that we could not comprehend, at first; a constant stream of traffic hurtling to the rear (to the west) and nothing going to the front (to the east). We realized that this was not a convoy moving to the rear; it was a case of 'every dog for himself'; it was a retreat, a rout.

"Here would come a 2½-ton, with only a driver, then another with several men in it (most of them bareheaded and in various stages of undress), next perhaps an engineer crane truck or an armored car, then several artillery prime movers—perhaps one of them towing a gun, command cars with officers in them, ¼-ton—anything which would run and which would get the driver and a few others away from the front. It wasn't orderly; it wasn't military; it wasn't a pretty sight—we were seeing American soldiers running away.

"About a mile farther up the road at the little town of PETIT-THIER, all traffic had stopped. In fact, it was the most perfect traffic jam I have ever seen. We had run into this hopeless mass of vehicles fleeing to the rear on a narrow road which would barely support two-way traffic at slow speeds. Vehicles streaming to the rear had attempted to pass each other in the intervals between the tanks of the 31st Tank Battalion, which was leading CCB, and now no one could move. . . .

"It was already 1515 and from the looks of the road jam, neither the tanks nor anything else was going to reach ST. VITH for a long time. Lieutenant Colonel Fuller, Corporal Cox, and I took over the job of clearing a path for the tanks, and we started getting vehicles to move over to the sides. Slowly a path was beginning to open and the tanks began to roll along at a snail's pace with halts ever 50 to 100 feet. Several times we had to wave the lead tank forward at full speed when some vehicle refused to pull over. Usually the sight of 30-odd tons of steel roaring down on him was all we needed to get the driver to move over.

"Several times senior officers in command cars attempted to pull out into a space which I was opening up, and each time I told them to get back, that I didn't care who they were, nothing was coming through except our tanks and anything else which was headed for the front, and to get out of the way. (One company commander, Captain Dudley J. Britton, Company B, 23d Armored Infantry Battalion, said, 'That day I saw the highest ranking traffic cops I have ever seen'. . . .

"Finally at 2015, Company A entered ST. VITH, followed closely by B and Headquarters Companies. It had taken two and one-half hours for a company to move three miles—all because of the vehicles fleeing to the rear with men who refused to pull aside and let troops through (troops who actually would save them if they could reach the town before the Germans did). There was one of the biggest tragedies of ST. VITH; that American soldiers fled, and by their fleeing crowded the roads over which reinforcements were coming; and thus prevented the arrival of these reinforcements in time to launch a counterattack to save the 422d and 423d Infantry Regiments, then cut off by the Germans east of ST. VITH."¹

General Clarke commented on the traffic conditions as follows;

"The panic of the afternoon of 17 December was so great at the road crossing just west of ST. VITH that an officer I stationed there to stop rearward movement was pushed aside by senior officers and I had to take charge personally to control the traffic."

THE DEFENSE IS ORGANIZED

At 171200 December, the situation in the ST. VITH area was critical. The 14th Cavalry Group on the north of the 106th Infantry Division had been driven back to about a north-south line through ST. VITH. Their situation was one of confusion and was extremely hazy. To the east of ST. VITH, the 422d and 423d Regimental Combat Teams of the 106th Division were cut off to the southeast of SCHONBERG. Communication with them by radio was sporadic. To the south of ST. VITH, CCB, 9th Armored Division, was attacking to try to retake WINTERSPELT. To its south, the 424th Regimental Combat Team of the 106th Infantry Division was holding a line. To their south, the situation was hazy. There was practically no tie-in of the units mentioned with units on their flanks. (See figure 4.)

¹ Personal Report, Traffic Conditions, VIELSALM-ST. VITH Road, 17 December 1944, by Major Donald P. Boyer, Jr., S3, 38th Armored Infantry Battalion, 7th Armored Division.

The plan for an immediate attack east from ST. VITH, to take and hold SCHONBERG and open escape corridors for the two surrounded combat teams, could not be carried out; it was impossible to bring the 7th Armored Division up to the ST. VITH area over the traffic-congested roads in time to launch the attack that afternoon.

CCB established its command post in a school building in the southeast corner of ST. VITH; the same building housed the command post of the 106th Infantry Division. Staff members of CCB tried to get a relatively accurate picture of the situation from officers of the 106th Division; but it was obvious that the shock of the initial German blow, together with their lack of combat experience, had partially disrupted the staff functioning of the 106th. All kinds of rumors were being spread; men who had fled from the front, apparently seeking to justify their action, gave an exaggerated and inaccurate picture of what was taking place. The situation most certainly was bad, and the impression that officers of CCB got was that the 106th no longer existed as an effective division. As staff sections of CCB began to arrive, carrying their equipment into the building, they met men from the 106th Division Headquarters leaving with their equipment.

The defense of the ST. VITH sector was turned over to General Clarke, commanding CCB, 7th Armored Division, by General Jones (106th Division) at about 1430 on the 17th of December, and was largely in his hands for the remainder of the action. At the time of the transfer, the enemy was only about three or four thousand yards from the town, and small-arms fire from the east was coming into the vicinity of the command post. The troops from the 106th Infantry Division, which came under General Clarke's command, were: Headquarters Company, 81st Engineer Battalion (Lt Col T. J. Riggs); Headquarters Company, 168th Engineer Battalion (Lt Col W. L. Nungesser); one platoon of infantry, which had been the division command post guard (1st Platoon, Company F, 423d Infantry Regiment); and a 105-mm armored field artillery battalion).

This artillery battalion was the 275th Armored Field Artillery Battalion (Separate) assigned to VIII Corps and in position near OBER EMMELS. They had remained in place despite the fact that no friendly troops were between them and the enemy. They had shifted their batteries so as to form road blocks, and had sited their guns for direct fire. When the 7th Armored Division began to arrive at ST. VITH, the commanding officer of the 275th, Lieutenant Colonel Clay, offered his battalion's services to General Clarke. This unit provided the entire artillery support for the initial defense until the organic artillery of the 7th Armored Division could be brought up into position.¹

The infantry platoon and the engineer elements were sent to the east of ST. VITH with instructions to proceed until they met Germans and then to dig in and hold. These troops furnished the only resistance to the German advance on ST. VITH until the arrival of 7th Armored Division units.

The build-up of a defensive cordon around the town was a piecemeal procedure, units being placed in the line as they arrived. Troop B of the 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron was the first unit to arrive. This troop was placed in position on the left of the road block established by the troops from the 106th Infantry Division. Other troops from CCB were added to the right and left as they arrived until a defensive line was formed east and north of ST. VITH. On the 17th, Troop B, dismounted, went into the center of the line with 6 officers and 136 men. On the 23d this troop had a strength of 47 enlisted men and no officers; casualties included the troop commander, Captain Robert J. Stewart, who was killed. The 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron (minus Troop B)² was sent to the northeast of ST. VITH in the WALLERODE area to contact the 14th Cavalry Group and to protect and screen the left flank. The next unit to arrive was the 38th Armored Infantry Battalion, less one company. It was put to the east of ST. VITH, and Lieutenant

1 *The 7th Armored Division in the Battle of St. VITH*, by Major General Robert W. Hasbrouck.

2 Troop D of the 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron was taken from its position about 1000 yards north of ST. VITH on 18 December and was ordered to BEHO to outpost CCA. On the 19th of December Troop D was sent to the west, where they were actively engaged in security missions in the division rear.

Colonel William H. G. Fuller, 38th Armored Infantry Battalion, was given command of that sector, including elements of the 106th Infantry Division in place. He was also given Troop B of the 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, and later on that evening was reinforced with Company B of the 23d Armored Infantry Battalion and Company A of the 31st Tank Battalion. The remainder of CCB (31st Tank Battalion (-), 23d Armored Infantry Battalion (-), Company B of the 33d Armored Engineer Battalion) closed in the assembly area to the west of ST. VITH. Before midnight, 17-18 December 1944, CCB was disposed as shown in figure 5.

A typical example of how units went into the line fighting to secure their defensive positions is given by Lieutenant Colonel Robert C. Erlenbusch, commanding officer of the 31st Tank Battalion:

"Company A, 31st Tank Battalion, was ordered to take up a defensive position on the high ground about 2000 yards east of ST. VITH. Lieutenant Dunn, the leading platoon leader, preceded his lead tank in a ¼-ton to reconnoiter for positions. About 1500 yards from ST. VITH, upon rounding a bend in the road, Lieutenant Dunn spotted, about 800 yards to his front, three German tanks and about one company of infantry moving in the direction of ST. VITH. He turned his vehicle around, issued instructions to his platoon by radio, climbed in his first tank, and led his platoon to the point where he saw the enemy approaching. The German force and the 1st Platoon, Company A, met head on at the bend of the road. The fight was short and at point blank range. We destroyed the three enemy tanks and killed or wounded about 50 of the enemy with no loss to our own forces. Company A secured the high ground, blocked the road, and extended its position north from the road along the ridge. Here, using part of each tank crew as infantry, they defended against several small attacks during the night of 17-18 December."¹

THE LINE HOLDS ON 18 DECEMBER 1944

By 0300 of 18 December the 7th Armored Division's plan had been formulated. Reserve Command, Colonel John L. Ryan, Jr., commanding,² was to defend the northern flank of the division sector; CCB was to defend in an arc around ST. VITH joining with CCB of the 9th Armored Division, south of the town; CCA, Colonel Dwight D. Rosebaum commanding, had gone into an assembly area southwest of ST. VITH, and was to remain there as division reserve. All night CCB worked feverishly to bring its troops up and to clear the congestion on the road between VIELSALM and ST. VITH. By 180700, the combat command extended in an U-shaped arc from HUNNINGEN on the north to WEISENBACH on the south—with the line manned from north to south as follows:

- Troop C of the 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron.
- Troop A of the 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron.
- Company A of the 38th Armored Infantry Battalion.
- Company B of the 38th Armored Infantry Battalion.
- Troop B of the 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron.
- Engineer elements of the 81st and 108th Engineer Battalions.
- Company B of the 23d Armored Infantry Battalion.

This line was reinforced by Company A, 31st Tank Battalion, placed in position just east of ST. VITH. The remainder of CCB, including the 31st Tank Battalion (minus Company A), 23d Armored Infantry Battalion (minus Company B), and Company B, 33d Armored Engineer Battalion, was assembled on the high ground west of the town ready to launch counterattacks. (See figure 5.)

Final plans were still being made at this time for a counterattack by the defenders. Task forces were organized and the time for the attack was set. Our forces still did not realize that this action represented a major effort by the Germans, in strength far superior to the defenders of ST. VITH.

1 From a letter to Major General Robert W. Hasbrouck, Headquarters Army Ground Forces, Washington, D. C., dated 23 March 1946.

2 Colonel John L. Ryan, Jr., became chief of staff of the 7th Armored Division when Colonel Church M. Matthews was killed. Lieutenant Colonel Fred M. Warren was acting commander of the Reserve Command until 28 December 1944 when Colonel Francis P. Tompkins took over.

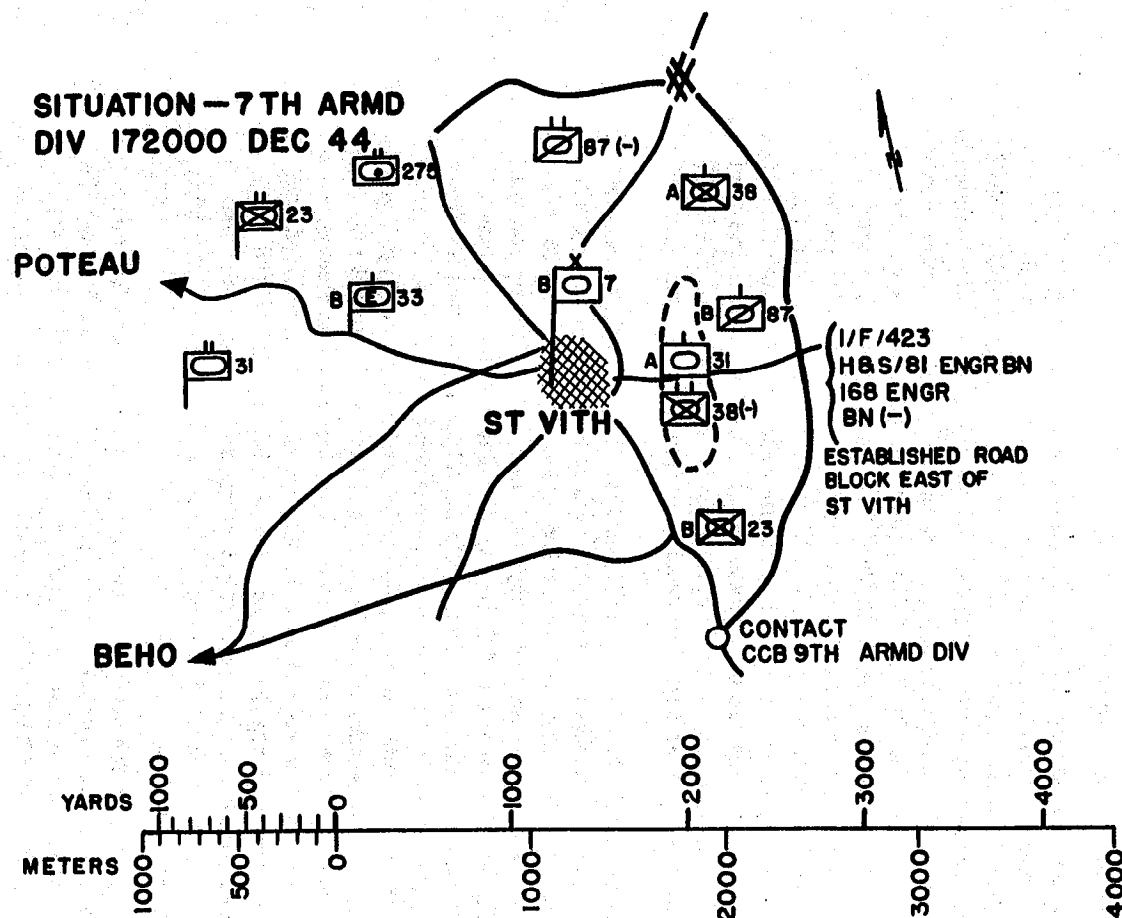


Figure 5. The build-up of the defense was a piecemeal procedure. At about 1530 elements of Headquarters Company, 81st Engineer Battalion, under Lt Col T. J. Riggs; 168th Engineer Battalion (-) under Lt Col Nungesser; and one platoon of infantry (1/F/423) established a road block east of ST. VITH. Troop B (Capt R. J. Stewart) of the 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron was placed to the north of this road block. About 1630 Company B (Capt D. J. Britton) of the 23d Armored Infantry Battalion was placed south of the road block. Company A (Capt R. C. Foster) of the 31st Tank Battalion was placed south of the road block. Company A (Capt W. H. Antsey) of the 38th Armored Infantry Battalion was placed north of Troop B, 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron and all troops to the east of ST. VITH were attached to the 38th Armored Infantry Battalion under Lt Col W. H. G. Fuller. Troops of the 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron were sent to the north to secure that flank. Other CCB units closed in assembly areas west of ST. VITH before midnight. See figure 10 for the successive lines held by CCB, 7th Armored Division, in the defense of St. Vith.

At 0200 the Germans launched the first of the bitter attacks which were to be hurled at the 7th Armored Division during the next six days. The attack hit Reserve Command to the north of ST. VITH and seemed to be a drive to take RECHT. Germans of the *1st SS Panzer Division* struck with such force in this night attack that withdrawal of Reserve Command Headquarters to POTEAU was ordered. The Germans made effective use of flares shot from their tanks to silhouette our tanks and blind our gunners. The 17th Tank Battalion (plus Company C of the 38th Armored Infantry Battalion), commanded by Lieutenant Colonel John P. Wempie, took up positions south of RECHT where they could place commanding fire on the town and could assist in covering the north flank of CCB, which was now seriously threatened.

Stopped by Reserve Command, the Germans continued their "squeeze play" on the ST. VITH area during the cold, misty morning when at 0800 they hit CCB with a well-coordinated attack by infantry supported by heavy tanks. From the north the attack moved in on HUNNINGEN and from the east against the line across the SCHONBERG road. HUNNINGEN was lost temporarily, but an aggressive counterattack was mounted by CCB, using three medium tank companies and one tank destroyer company (Company B, 31st Tank Battalion; plus two medium tank companies from the 14th Tank Battalion; and Company A of the 811th Tank Destroyer Battalion, borrowed from CCB of the 9th Armored Division). The crossroad was recaptured at a cost to the Germans of seven tanks and one armored car destroyed, and over 100 infantry killed. On the east, CCB restored the line with a counterattack by two medium tank companies (Companies A and C of the 31st Tank Battalion) after initial penetrations had been made. Such counterattacks, carried out by CCB with aggressiveness and determination, were characteristic of the defense of ST. VITH and must have caused the Germans to think the defenders were in greater strength than was the case.

While the northern and eastern flanks had been heavily engaged, the northeastern sector (Troop A, 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron; Company A, 38th Armored Infantry Battalion; Troop B, 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron) had been rather quiet. The only excitement there had been when an M8 armored car from Troop B destroyed a Tiger tank. The armored car had been in a concealed position near the boundary of Troop B, 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron and Company A, 38th Armored Infantry Battalion, when the Tiger approached the lines at right angles to move along a trail in front of the main line of resistance. As the tank passed the armored car, the latter slipped out of position and started up the trail behind the Tiger, accelerating in an attempt to close. At the same moment the German tank commander saw the M8, and started traversing his gun to bear on it. It was a race between the Americans, who were attempting to close so that their 37-mm gun would be effective on the Tiger's thin rear armor, and the Germans, who were desperately striving to bring their 88 to bear. Rapidly the M8 closed to 25 yards, and quickly pumped in three rounds; the lumbering Tiger stopped and shuddered; there was a muffled explosion, followed by flames which billowed out of the turret and engine ports, after which the armored car returned to its position.¹

At about 1000, during the fighting on the north and east flanks, the 31st Tank Battalion received the disturbing news that its trains, together with those of the 23d Armored Infantry Battalion, were separated from the rest of the battalion, and fighting a desperate action against strong combat patrols pushing west from POTEAU. The two service companies had spent the night near PETIT-THIER and were preparing to move up and join their battalions when they were attacked. Using cooks, mechanics, clerks, and a few casualties as infantry, and three tanks, which had just been repaired, the trains successfully disengaged and moved to the rear, then south, and finally into position at KROMBACH, about four miles southwest of ST. VITH.

This information indicated that the same tank and infantry forces, which had forced Reserve Command and its 17th Tank Battalion out of RECHT during the early morning hours, had pushed

¹ This action was reported to Major Donald P. Boyer, Jr., S3, 38th Armored Infantry Battalion, by Captain W. H. Anstey (commanding Company A, 38th Armored Infantry Battalion) who witnessed the engagement.

on to the southwest, had taken POTEAU, and were in danger of isolating CCB from the rest of the division. To counter this threat, Company D of the 31st Tank Battalion was placed astride the ST. VITH-POTEAU Road about 1000 yards west of RODT. Meanwhile, the division ordered CCA to move from BEHO, where it was in reserve, and attack to the north and retake POTEAU.

The Germans recognized well the value of the crossroads at POTEAU and intended to hold it at all costs. Immediately after occupying it they started digging in their tanks and infantry along the woods to the north and east overlooking the crossroads and the open ground surrounding it. In its initial attack at 1320, CCA forced its way into POTEAU, but the murderous fire of the enemy forced them back to cover south of the crossroads. Later in the afternoon, CCA received orders from division:

"Imperative you seize POTEAU this P.M. and hold it!"

Just as dark fell, CCA launched its second attack and this time secured the crossroads. It was bitter fighting in the dark; house-to-house fighting by the infantry, and a stand to the last man by the Germans. The stand put up by the units of the *1st SS Panzer (Adolph Hitler) Division* which had seized POTEAU was an excellent index of the caliber of troops involved in the ST. VITH operation. Vigorous, well-trained, in splendid physical condition, superbly equipped, and imbued with the idea that nothing could stop them, these SS veterans displayed initiative and skill that stamped them as being the equal of the best troops Germany had employed at any time since 1939.¹

By noon it was apparent that although von Rundstedt had not gained ST. VITH in his first drive, he was determined to take the town. Through ST. VITH ran the only east-west railroad between the RHINE and the ARDENNES, and it was learned later that the entire counteroffensive was based upon utilizing the town as the advance rail depot for both the *Fifth Panzer* and the *Sixth SS Panzer Armies*. Also the network of roads was needed for deploying the advancing columns of the *Fifth Panzer Army* towards the northwest so as to support the *Sixth SS Panzer Army* in its drive toward LIEGE and ANTWERP.

Having failed in their initial attempts to take ST. VITH, armored spearheads were sliding by on the north and south and preparing to cut into the rear, isolating the 7th Armored Division just as they were to do to BASTOGNE and the 101st Airborne Division, several days later. To the north STAVELOT had been occupied in force, and on the south GOUVY (a large supply depot) and CHERAM were reported to be occupied. It was no longer a question of relieving the surrounded 422d and 423d Combat Teams; it was a question of denying ST. VITH to the Germans and of keeping the division from being cut off to the rear. If the two combat teams were to save themselves, they would have to fight their way westward to ST. VITH. Although CCB probably could have denied ST. VITH to the Germans by holding the high ground to the west of the town, the situation had been such that the defenders had been unable to choose the place for their stand. The enemy had been met, in a very critical tactical situation, on the high ground east of the town and he was held from that position until the 21st.

By now it was known that immediately opposing CCB was a German corps with the *18th* and *62d Volks Grenadier Divisions*, while northeast of CCB in the RECHT-POTEAU area was at least

¹ It is interesting at this point to note the activities and the morale of the Germans who were attacking ST. VITH as the story is told in the diary of a Lieutenant Behman, who, as a German artillery officer, participated in the German offensive which started on 16 Dec 44. This officer was captured by CCB, 7th Armored Division, when ST. VITH was retaken 23 Jan 45.

"18 December: The infantry is before ST. VITH. The men hear the wildest rumors of successes, but the official notices are very laconic about the attack.

"19 December: Endless columns of prisoners pass; at first, about a hundred, then another group of about one thousand. Our car gets stuck on the road. I get out and walk. Generalfeldmarschall MODEL himself directs traffic. (He's a little, undistinguished looking man with a monocle.) Now the thing is going. The roads are littered with destroyed American vehicles, cars, and tanks. Another column of prisoners passes."

a combat command from the *1st SS Panzer Division*. Also in the area of the afternoon assault on Company B of the 38th Armored Infantry Battalion, 19 dead paratroopers wearing the insignia of *Gross-Deutschland Division* had been identified.

The following was the total of known casualties inflicted on the Germans by CCB, after one and one-half days of combat:

<i>Destroyed</i>	<i>Damaged</i>	<i>Killed</i>
1 MK VI (King Tiger)	2 Assault Guns, 75-mm	339
9 MK IV's		
1 Assault Gun, 88-mm (Ferdinand)		
2 Assault Guns, 75-mm		
8 Armored cars		

In the afternoon of the 18th it was decided that ST. VITH was no longer tenable for the Combat Command Headquarters, and the latter was moved to KROMBACH to the southwest. This was accomplished just before dark. Communication and liaison were established with troops in the line from the new command post and with CCB of the 9th Armored Division on the right flank. Following a German attack at 2230, which was repulsed, continued noises and troop movements were heard, but no further developments occurred.

The experience of Company B, 38th Armored Infantry Battalion, which had been placed in the line east of ST. VITH, was typical of the small unit action on the nose of the defensive horse-shoe. It was the sum total of such actions as these that made up the big picture on 18 December 1944. An interview with a member of Company B reveals a portion of the picture.

"At about 0900 (?), Captain Greene came down from the Company CP to check the line, and after checking the 1st Platoon he went on to the 2d. When he was about halfway down to the 2d Platoon, 88 fire and small-arms fire announced a German attack by infantry with at least one tank. It was reported that Captain Greene went forward with a tommy gun. He did not return.

"Lieutenant Higgins took over command of the company. The main force of the attack was against the 2d and 3d Platoons. At about 1000 or 1100, Lieutenant Jamiel and Sergeant Knight, his platoon sergeant, saw a squad from the 2d Platoon taking off, and the lieutenant sent Sergeant Knight after the men. It was the Machine-Gun Squad and they did not return. Their absence weakened the 2d Platoon so that they were forced to fall back about 100 yards. The other two platoons remained in the same positions—in foxholes. The attacking Germans were paratroopers, and they suffered heavy losses. Lieutenant Jamiel himself saw over 30 dead Germans. The tank which supported them was knocked out by a medium tank of ours. This first attack commenced after 0950 and lasted until about 1500. The remainder of the afternoon and night was quiet. Vehicular movement and even shouted German commands could be heard during the night."

EVENTS OF 19 DECEMBER 1944

During the night of 18-19 December, there were noises indicating considerable activity and vehicular movement in the German rear areas—the arrival of more troops to reinforce those already attacking ST. VITH. After midnight there was constant patrol and counterpatrol activity on both sides and the Germans placed a great deal of harassing fires on all roads and road junctions, using mortars, 88's, and for the first time, artillery firing battalion concentrations. Two night attacks were launched against CCB's northern flank with infantry and tanks, apparently in an effort to seize HUNNINGEN. Both attacks were repulsed by the combined fires of the tanks of the 31st Tank Battalion and of armored cars and assault guns of the 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron.

At no time during the day was enemy pressure absent from any portion of the division's perimeter. (See figure 6.) It seemed that the Germans were seeking a "soft spot"; if they found one part of the line strongly defended, they pulled back and tried another. Starting on the northern flank at 0930, the enemy attacked in the direction of HUNNINGEN in an attempt to envelop CCB's left flank. For more than three hours they attacked repeatedly, employing more than 500 infantry

supported by tanks. At 1300 they finally withdrew, leaving one tank burning and 150 dead. Other tanks were hit and damaged, but were able to withdraw. Another attack started from the direction of WALLERODE, where the Germans were massing in strength, but it was broken up when our artillery caught the Germans in the open terrain before our lines.

Failing to find a soft spot on the north, the Germans next hit the southern flank where they moved against CCB of the 9th Armored Division. Before this attack even got going three enemy tanks were knocked out and the rest of the force withdrew to try another place. The southern flank of CCB of the 7th Armored Division was then hit by a reinforced infantry company with armored support (one MK V (Panther) and two assault guns). During the morning, this part of the line had been reinforced by a tank destroyer section of two 90-mm guns (from Company A of the 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion). This tank destroyer section, with three rounds, knocked out the Panther and one assault gun, leaving the infantry to advance across open ground with no armored support. On they came only to be slaughtered by our infantry (Company B, 23d Armored Infantry Battalion), who held their fire until the enemy had closed to less than 50 yards. What was left of the attacking Germans quickly fled leaving almost 60 casualties.

CCB received additional support at 1510 on the 19th of December, when the 434th Armored Field Artillery Battalion and two batteries of the 965th Field Artillery Battalion were attached and placed in position. The only artillery support up to this time had been furnished by the 275th Armored Field Artillery Battalion. The 965th Field Artillery Battalion (-), the 275th Armored Field Artillery Battalion, and the 434th Field Artillery Battalion were placed under control of Lieutenant Colonel James G. Dubuisson, the commanding officer of the 434th Field Artillery Battalion; and a group fire direction center, which functioned smoothly and continuously throughout the action, was established. Observation of fires was limited; there were no liaison planes with the artillery at ST. VITH. Although the enemy was channelized in his movement along the roads, offering wonderful opportunities to destroy him by artillery fire, CCB could not deliver the blow with complete effect because of the lack of aerial observation needed to adjust fire.

During the afternoon of the 19th, Brigadier General William M. Hoge, Commanding General, Combat Command B, 9th Armored Division, visited the command post of CCB, 7th Armored Division, in KROMBACH. The vulnerability of General Hoge's position on the forward side of the stream and on the railroad, which ran south from ST. VITH, was discussed. Should ST. VITH be lost, CCB of the 9th would have been isolated and cut off, as there was no way for them to withdraw their vehicles across the stream and railroad tracks except through ST. VITH. A plan was agreed upon to be executed after dark that night. First, the vehicles of the 27th Armored Infantry Battalion, CCB, 9th Armored Division, were withdrawn to areas in the rear of the new position. Medium tank companies of the 14th Tank Battalion followed and the infantry elements came out last. This movement was accomplished without too much difficulty, and the right flank of CCB, 7th Armored Division, was thereby made more secure. Close liaison and excellent cooperation were maintained between the two combat commands during the whole period in the vicinity of ST. VITH, even though the next higher headquarters of CCB, 9th Armored Division, was in doubt and conflicting orders were received.

During the morning of 19 December, part of the 112th Regimental Combat Team of the 28th Infantry Division, commanded by Colonel G. M. Nelson, joined the 7th Armored Division in its defense of this area. The combat team had been out of contact with their division and were completely in the dark as to the location of any friendly troops whatsoever until a patrol from the 7th Armored Division had contacted them. This was an indication of the situation as it existed southwest of CCB.

EVENTS OF 20 DECEMBER 1944

The general situation in the vicinity of ST. VITH by the morning of the 20th was not yet desperate, but was becoming increasingly difficult. (See figure 7.) Everyone realized by this time that we were not facing a local counterattack, but a full scale offensive and that the ST. VITH

SITUATION OF 7TH ARMD DIV AS OF 20 DEC 44

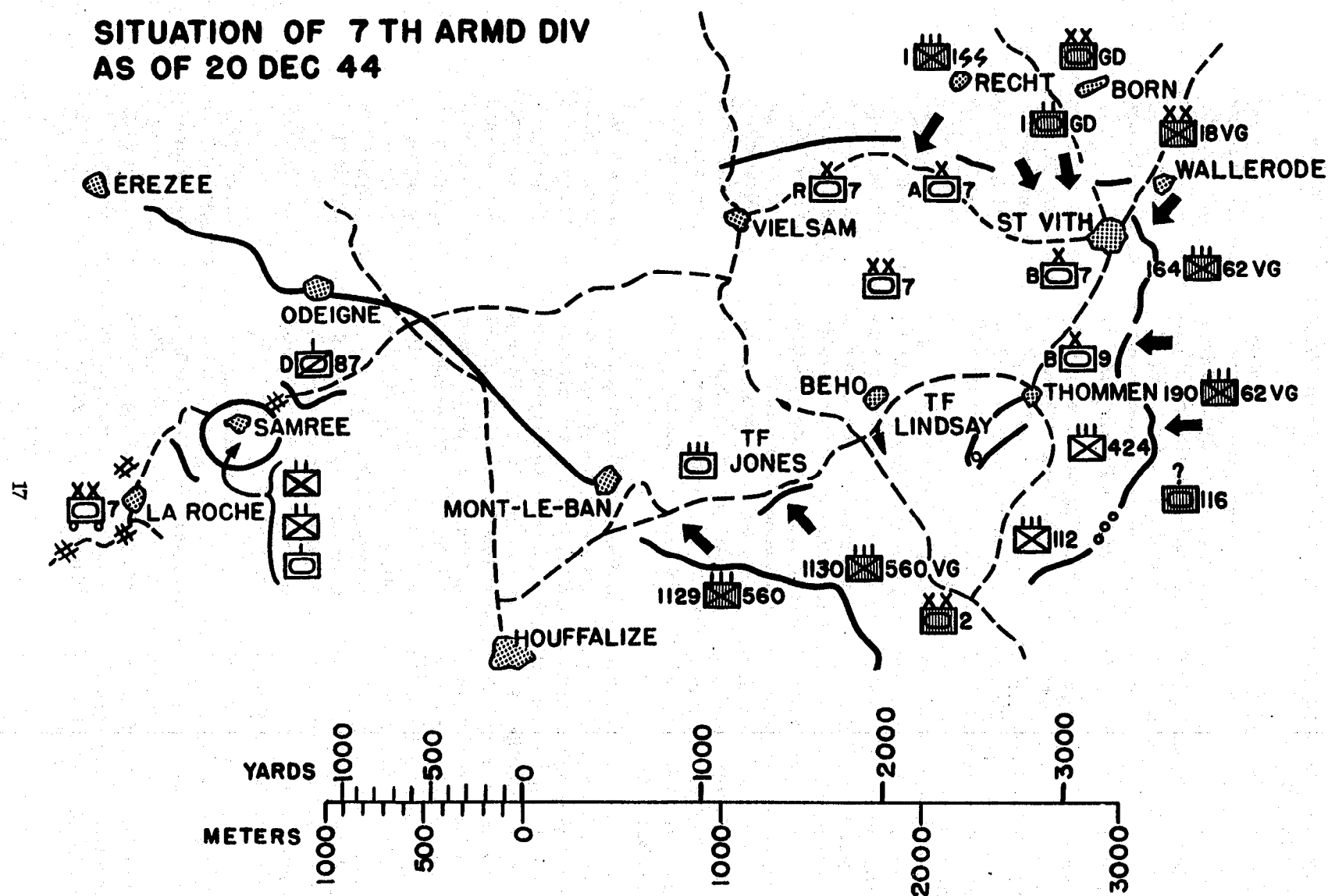


Figure 7. Combat Command B had a relatively quiet day, but there was a constant build-up of enemy strength for an attack on ST. VITH. Task Force Jones was formed to secure the southern flank. There was increasing enemy pressure on supply installations at SAMREE and LA ROCHE.

defenders were catching a heavy portion of it in their sector. Through intelligence reports from higher headquarters, and captured prisoners, the Americans knew that they were meeting the best of the German troops.

By the end of the day prisoners from the following German divisions had been interrogated by the IPW Team of the 7th Armored Division (enemy divisions listed in relative order of positions from north to south): *1st SS Panzer Division, Gross Deutschland Brigade, 18th Volks Grenadier Division, 62d Volks Grenadier Division, 2d Panzer Division, 560th Volks Grenadier Division, and 116th Panzer Division.* Manteuffel had assigned the task of taking ST. VITH to two infantry divisions of the 66th Corps; his failure to accomplish this in a reasonable time had caused the commitment of additional troops from both *Fifth and Sixth Panzer Armies.*

All manner of reports were received indicating that the enemy was by-passing the 7th Armored Division's positions on the north and rolling up the flank on the southeast, making the ST. VITH sector comparable to a thumb protruding into the enemy's mouth; and it seemed that this thumb could be easily bitten off. The enemy was reported to be in strength at HOUFFALIZE, LA ROCHE, and SAMREE, all to the west of CCB, and at TROIS-PONTS to the northwest. In order to protect their flank, Division Headquarters, on the 19th, had ordered the 40th Tank Battalion and Company A, 33d Armored Engineer Battalion, to outpost CHERAM and GOUVY. At GOUVY these troops found an army ration dump, containing 50,000 rations, which had just been set on fire by army quartermaster personnel to prevent its capture by the enemy, who were already threatening with small-arms fire. Company D of the 40th Tank Battalion drove off the enemy and extinguished the fire, which had done little damage, and began the issuance of rations to all units of the division. At GOUVY there was also an abandoned army prisoner of war enclosure, containing over 700 German prisoners of war, guarded by one officer and eight military police. These prisoners were successfully evacuated by the division. Division Headquarters created other task forces out of the remnants of the 14th Cavalry Group and assigned them the mission of screening and protecting the southeast flank of the division. Troop D, 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, was directed to proceed to SALMCHATEAU and then west, and was given the mission of screening the northern flank of the division rear.

The most significant change that occurred in the disposition and composition of division troops on the 20th was the formation of Task Force Jones, commanded by the commanding officer of the 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion, and in position on the southern and southwestern flank of the division to the right rear of CCB. The force consisted of part of the 17th Tank Battalion, 440th Armored Field Artillery Battalion, part of the 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion, and elements of the 38th Armored Infantry Battalion, 31st Tank Battalion, 40th Tank Battalion, 33d Armored Engineer Battalion, and a detachment of the 14th Cavalry Group. The strength of the enemy and the seriousness of the situation on the south, leading to the formation of Task Force Jones, was obtained in part from Lieutenant Colonel Stone, with whom the division had been in touch about two days. This officer was located near GOUVY with an assortment of about 250 stragglers, including both officer and enlisted Quartermaster, Engineer, and Signal personnel whom he had collected. He had established a defensive position, saying, "By God the others may run, but I am staying here and will hold at all cost." Stone's force was incorporated into Task Force Jones. The force was in position by about 1600 and immediately became engaged at CHERAM and GOUVY. By 1800 it was receiving a strong German attack which it successfully repulsed.

In spite of this activity in its rear, CCB had a relatively quiet day. During the night of 19-20 December some infiltration was reported by the 17th Tank Battalion at RECHT. At 0800 the 17th Tank Battalion was instructed to withdraw to RODT, leaving one company plus a platoon of infantry in position north and east of RODT to maintain contact with CCA on the left. Enemy concentrations of tanks and infantry collected in WALLERODE and NEIDER EMMELS. Heavy artillery concentrations quieted these threats. During the afternoon enemy columns were reported moving from MEDELL to BORN and at 1630 enemy tanks moved into OBER EMMELS and forced

out a light tank platoon on outpost there; but the forces on the high ground to the south held firmly. During the night of 20-21 December approximately 68 men and two officers led by Lieutenant Long of the Intelligence and Reconnaissance Platoon, 423d Regiment (one of the surrounded regiments of the 106th Infantry Division) infiltrated back through CCB's lines.

When interviewed, Lieutenant Long stated that the commanding officers had told them that the two regiments (422d and 423d) were preparing to surrender, and that orders were being given for the destruction of their arms and equipment. The troops had been told that any personnel wishing to attempt to infiltrate to friendly lines rather than surrender were authorized to leave. These men were some of those who had chosen to risk returning and fighting again to laying down their arms and surrendering. CCB established an assembly point in the schoolhouse at ST. VITH where these men were given rations, such other supplies as they needed, and a well-deserved rest. During the night of 21-22 December, when the situation became critical, these men were put back into the line. When they were told that they were going back into the line, their enthusiasm was high, and subsequent reports obtained from the troops with whom they fought indicated that without exception these men discharged their duty in exemplary fashion.

During the day, Combat Command A, to the left rear of Combat Command B, was under considerable pressure in the vicinity of POTEAU. Division headquarters had sent them a message at 0925 that it was imperative that they command the road leading into POTEAU from RECHT. Although CCB did not know it at the time, the situation to the left rear and on the northern flank was critical.

A unit commanders' meeting was held at the CCB command post just after dark. The S4 reported on the supply situation; and in view of the vague information available, General Clarke emphasized the necessity of conserving supplies of ammunition and rations. Instructions were given to issue only two-thirds of a ration daily and to fire artillery missions sparingly and then only where the situation appeared to be critical.

EVENTS OF 21 DECEMBER 1944

The Germans realized that the failure to control the network of roads and railroads centering on ST. VITH was disrupting the timetable of the entire counteroffensive.¹ The stand of the 7th Armored Division had left a dangerous salient in the German lines which threatened the northern flank of *Fifth Panzer Army* and prevented a link-up between the *Fifth* and *Sixth Panzer Armies*. All further westward movement of *Sixth SS Panzer Army* had virtually stopped for lack of needed gasoline and ammunition, which were on the supply columns immobilized to the east of ST. VITH, or on the trains halted between PRUM and GEROLSTEIN. Accordingly, orders were issued to *II SS Panzer Corps* to move to the south and take ST. VITH without delay.

All during the night of 20-21 December tanks and other vehicles could be heard massing to the north, east, and south of ST. VITH. *II SS Panzer Corps* was moving into position, and at 1100, the assault was launched. (See figure 8.) From the time of the first attack on the 21st until the completion of the successful withdrawal of the 7th Armored Division across the SALM River two days later, the enemy attacked unceasingly along the entire front of the division. Throughout the 21st and until 2200 that night, the lines held against continuous assault of infantry, supported by heavy artillery and "screaming meemie" concentrations of unprecedented size and duration. Large formations of enemy tanks joined in the assault, and smashed their way into the lines, where they blasted the defenders from their foxholes with point-blank tank fire. Time after time, the German infantry were forced to withdraw under the aimed short-range fire of the gallant

1 Another extract from the same German officer's diary mentioned before further indicates that ST. VITH was holding back the flow of German traffic. After the fall of ST. VITH on 21 Dec 44, their traffic moved more freely.

"22 December: After ST. VITH is taken, traffic flows continuously. If enemy planes had appeared, it would have been a terrific disaster. An Infantry Division and Infantry Regiment CPs are set up in town. Also our Artillery Battalion CP."

SITUATION OF THE 7TH ARMD DIV 21 DEC 44

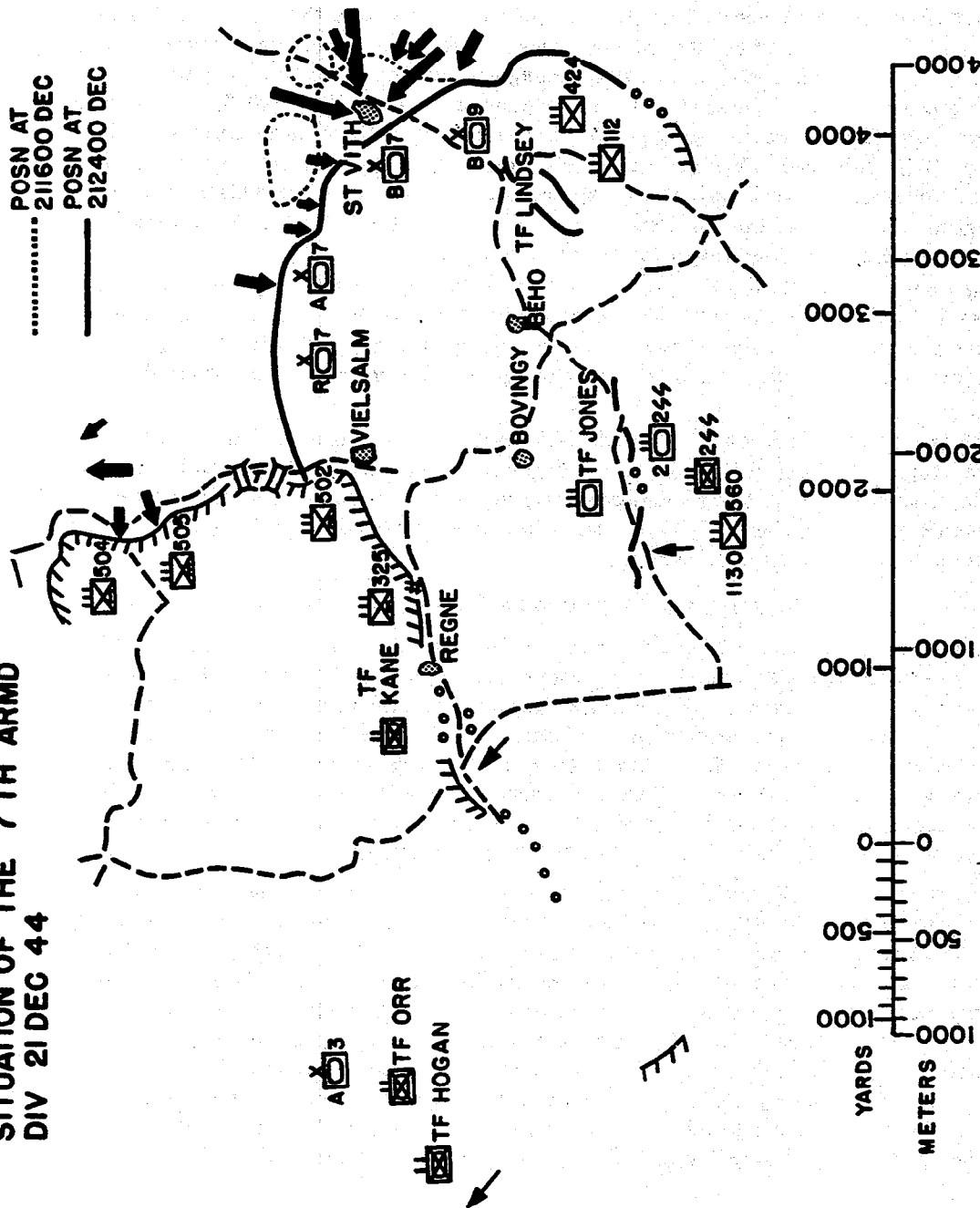


Figure 8. A full-scale corps attack was launched against the town, and at 2200 CCB of the 7th Armored Division withdrew to the high ground west of ST. VITH. CCA of the 7th captured high ground northwest of POTEAU and repelled counterattacks. Task Force Jones was receiving enemy attacks from the south.

infantrymen, engineers, tankers, reconnaissance troops, and others who stood their ground and inflicted huge losses upon the attacking formations. Even the heavy tanks were forced to withdraw, leaving destroyed hulks battered and burning in their wake.

On that day, the men of the 7th Armored performed, individually and collectively, repeated deeds of heroism; soldiers not only engaged in hand-to-hand combat with the German infantry, but also destroyed German tanks with bazookas and grenades.

Still the Germans attacked. Starting at 1100 with an artillery barrage on the northern and eastern positions of CCB and an infantry-tank attack against the juncture of CCB and CCB of the 9th Armored Division, the Germans stepped up the scale of their assault; by 1300 the entire line of CCB, 7th Armored Division, was aflame with enemy artillery, "screaming meemies," tanks, and infantry pouring a concentration of steel at the defenders. As the enemy closed in they were met in turn by all possible concentrated fires that could be brought to bear—but still they attacked. Major attacks were launched against that part of the line held by the 38th Armored Infantry Battalion at 1100, 1230, 1400, 1610, and 1710; while the northern flank manned by the 31st Tank Battalion and the 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron was hit with attacks at 1300, 1730, 1805, and 1820.

All attacks were turned back, and CCB's lines continued to hold. Then three heavy assaults were started by the Germans, with each directed along the axis of the main roads entering ST. VITH; at 1650 from the east along the SCHONBERG Road; followed by an attack down the MALMEDY Road at 1835; with the last one starting up the PRUM Road at 2000. Each of these attacks was preceded by intense artillery barrages lasting from 15 to 35 minutes, and closely followed by the infantry and tanks. The Germans were not to be denied and their relentless pressure since 1100 in the morning had left gaps in the line, since there were no replacements for the dead and wounded.¹ By 2000 CCB's lines had been penetrated in at least three points. The battle continued until approximately 2200 when General Clarke, seeing that a portion of his position was no longer tenable, issued the order to withdraw the center of the line to the high ground west of ST. VITH.

Those elements which were cut off east of town were ordered to attack through the town or north of it to join the forces which were establishing a new defensive line. Officers were established at control points west of the town to collect stragglers and to place units in a defensive position as they got back within the friendly screen.

During the time this concerted drive was being made on the front, the troops on the north flank were not heavily engaged, although there was a definite threat in the OBER EMMELS-NEIDER EMMELS area. It was planned to anchor a defense west of ST. VITH on this still substantial north flank and hold there. The center of the defensive line (from HUNNINGEN to ST. VITH-WALLERODE Road) was to swing back to the west of ST. VITH and establish a line for elements east of the town to fall back through. This was accomplished and most of the troops were brought out as units.

All through the night of 21-22 December stragglers were coming back from the troops which had been overrun east of ST. VITH. Officer control posts had been set up on all roads to intercept these men and send them to the HINDERHAUSEN area. This was done and by early forenoon of 22 December about 150 stragglers had been gathered up.

The situation on the right flank of the division became critical during the 21st of December. CCB, 9th Armored Division, requested assistance, and Task Force Lindsey, which had been held in division reserve, was ordered to GILHAUSEN to reinforce that unit. This assistance was sufficient to restore the situation, and Task Force Lindsey was returned to its former mission of reserve at 211000. On the left flank of CCB, CCA maintained its position in and around POTEAU throughout the day. A strong attack, which included tanks and artillery, was successfully repulsed around 1330. Strong patrols on both sides were active during the day. The enemy established an

¹ *The Seventh Armored Division in the Battle of ST. VITH*, by Major General Robert W. Hasbrouck.

effective ambush in some thick woods southeast of POTEAU on the ST. VITH-POTEAU Road. Before the ambush was discovered, the enemy was successful in capturing the occupants of eight peeps and one light tank which had been knocked out. Personnel included such key officers as the Executive Officer, CCA; Liaison Officer, CCA; Executive Officer and Adjutant, 48th Armored Infantry Battalion; and others. Upon discovery, the enemy abandoned its ambush, and the key road was again opened for friendly traffic. At 2000 another strong hostile attack, supported by heavy mortar, machine gun, and artillery fire, was repulsed.

Anticipating the possibility of CCB's being unable to hold the present position, General Clarke had initiated reconnaissance on the road leading to the west, through HINDERHAUSEN and COMMANSTER to VIELSALM, a possible avenue of withdrawal. This road was in poor condition and for the most part passed through a forest. Engineers and artillerymen had been put to work on critical and impassable spots; but even with this improvement passage over this road was not easy.

EVENTS OF 22 DECEMBER 1944

The Germans continued to attack with infantry and tanks. At 0200 the 928th Grenadier Battalion attacked RODT from the rear. The enemy widened this penetration and at 1135 RODT was captured, splitting CCA and CCB. The nine-hour battle for RODT was a grim affair in which personnel from every possible source--cooks, drivers, radio operators--were employed to augment the defense in a desperate effort to prevent the enemy from driving a deeper wedge between the two combat commands. The loss of RODT necessitated CCB's pulling back its left flank to protect HINDERHAUSEN, a key position on the emergency exit route to COMMANSTER and VIELSALM. (See figures 9 and 10.)

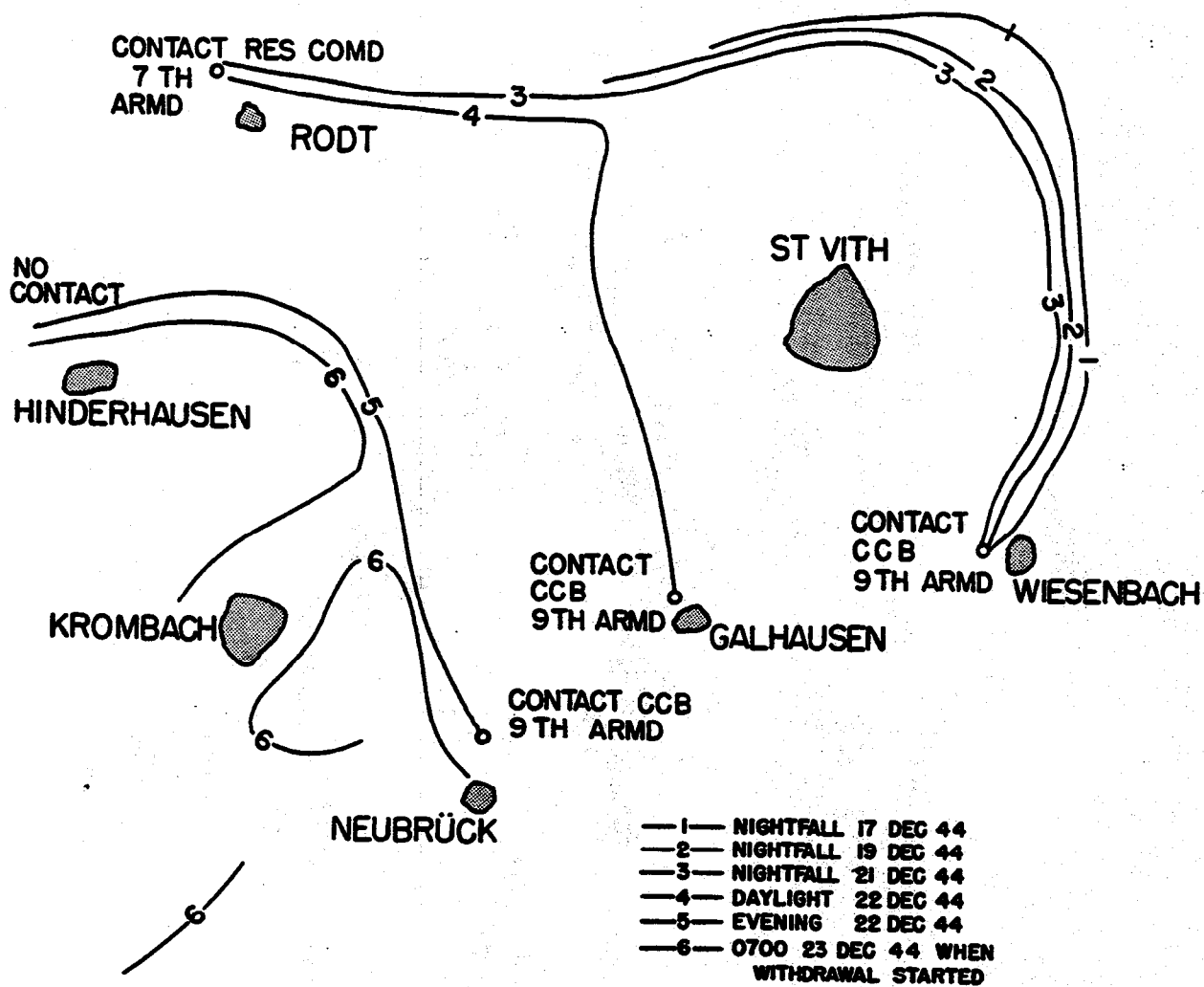
By dark the line was established again and was strengthened by the addition of the 17th Tank Battalion (-) on the south flank of CCB to tie-in with CCB of the 9th Armored Division. Contact with CCA on the northwest was lost. At 0700 the command post of CCB was moved to COMMANSTER. During this day all unessential vehicles were sent to the rear. By nightfall the line was being held with the 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, Lieutenant Colonel Boylan commanding, on the left; the 31st Tank Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Erlenbusch commanding, in the center; the 17th Tank Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Wemple commanding, on the south. The boundary between the 31st Tank Battalion and the 17th Tank Battalion was the railroad line running southwest from ST. VITH.

At 1845 enemy tanks and infantry attacked along the railroad towards KROMBACH. Infantry broke through and occupied the town. Most of Lieutenant Colonel Wemple's force was able to fight its way out the next morning. CCB of the 9th Armored Division was also receiving a heavy attack at this time and was being slowly pushed back toward BRAUNLAUF. It held on to its contact with CCB of the 7th Armored Division, pivoting back on General Clarke's right flank and preventing an attempt of the enemy to separate the two combat commands.

At POTEAU, to the left rear of CCB, CCA was receiving increasing pressure from the enemy, who was continuing his attempts to outflank the right of CCA. Meanwhile, the enemy on the north struck heavily at 2215 but was driven off. A measure of the bitterness of the fighting on all fronts is indicated by the following extract from the personal reports of members of Company B of Lieutenant Colonel Robert C. Rhea's 23d Armored Infantry Battalion.

"On Friday, the company trains were moved to the west of KROMBACH. During the morning the men walked back crosscountry to a new line which was set up about 1000 yards to the east of KROMBACH. This line had no depth, and as Captain Britton pointed out: 'Once the line was pierced, it was finished.' At the railroad underpass about 1000 yards northeast of KROMBACH, a bazookaman and a machine-gun squad were posted. They wanted to mine the underpass, but no mines or explosives were available. The 81-mm mortars of Company B were in position in KROMBACH, where they fired 600 rounds in 20 minutes and broke the base plates which were welded to the floor of the half-track.

23



SUCCESSIVE LINES IN THE DEFENSE OF ST VITH

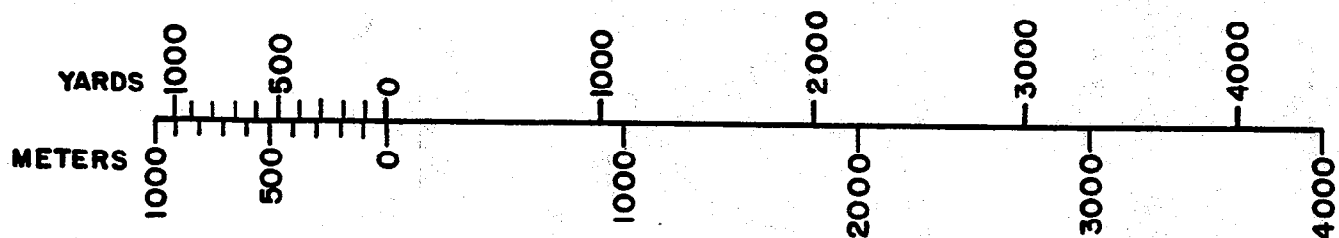


Figure 10. Successive lines in the defense of St. Vith.

"At about 1700, strong enemy combat patrols began coming along the railroad embankment, and tanks came toward the underpass. The bazookaman fired at the tanks, and when the bazooka round bounced off the front, he withdrew. Captain Britton had just come up toward the front and was warming his feet in an oven when the enemy burst into his position. Some of the men pulled back to the north until they ran into tanks of Company D of the 31st Tank Battalion; these men rode out with those tanks. The remainder of the company fell back to the motor park in KROMBACH where the half-tracks were gassing. Late Friday night these half-tracks moved to VIELSALM where they met the remainder of the company next morning. Captain Britton said there were men from almost every conceivable unit on the vehicles.

"Back at the line, some men remained with another unit which held fast and fought it out. Our artillery and mortar fire worked up and down the railroad track. One Company B mechanic, T/5 Robert Cutts, had a radio with which he called back to the FO giving him the necessary adjustments in the artillery fire. These men also finally pulled back from the line when the 17th Tank Battalion moved out, and many of them rode the tanks out of the area."

Pressure continued to increase along the entire front; and, as the 7th Armored Division shortened its lines and again regrouped, German infantry and tanks pressed strongly on all positions. Practically the entire division area was now being engaged by long-range artillery fire. In the north, the enemy in strength was along the east bank of the SALM River from east of TROIS PONTS to GRAND HALLEUX, and in the south along the high ground south of the highway running west from SALMCHATEAU. This meant that the remainder of the 106th Infantry Division, CCB of the 9th Armored Division, the 14th Cavalry Group, some corps troops, including artillery which had been attached to the 7th Armored Division, and the entire 7th Armored Division with attachments, less trains, were left east of the SALM River; all units were short of supplies and were completely fatigued from five or more days and nights of continuous fighting. There was only one sure exit route, a secondary road running west from VIELSALM; and one probable alternate route, the road SALMCHATEAU-JOUBIEVAL-LIERNIEUX.

As the position was obviously untenable, Field Marshal Montgomery in a message to Major General Hasbrouck, Commanding the 7th Armored Division and its conglomeration of units, ordered a withdrawal: "You have accomplished your mission—a mission well-done. It is time to withdraw." All unessential vehicles were withdrawn at once, followed by part of the artillery, which began displacing rearward about midnight. CCB of the 9th Armored Division was scheduled to be the first unit to withdraw, but their commanding general advised General Hasbrouck that they were engaged with the enemy and the muddy condition of the roads and fields was such that an immediate withdrawal would be unfeasible. It was necessary to postpone the initial time for withdrawal, as CCB of the 7th Armored Division was also heavily engaged with the enemy. At the same time the enemy was building up strong forces in front of the 82d Airborne Division, west of SALMCHATEAU. In view of the enemy's relentless pressure, especially at base of the salient, the 7th Armored Division commander, General Hasbrouck, radioed Generals Clarke and Hoge of the two combat commands B that:

"The situation is such on the west of the river south of the 82d Airborne Division that if we don't join them soon, the opportunity will be gone. It will be necessary to disengage, whether circumstances are favorable or not, if we are to carry out any kind of withdrawal with equipment. Inform me of your situation at once, particularly with regard to the possibility of disengagement and execution of withdrawal."

THE SEVENTH DAY—23 DECEMBER 1944

The enemy's pressure from the east eased slightly, and H-hour for withdrawal was announced as 0600. CCB of the 9th Armored Division, having received the announcement late, actually initiated the movement about 0700. General Clarke of CCB, 7th Armored Division, ordered Lieutenant Colonel Wemple to bring out all vehicles and troops at KROMBACH and southwest thereof through BEHO to VIELSALM. An infantry company of the 424th Regiment at BRAUNLAUF was to accompany them. North of KROMBACH all troops and vehicles were to come out through HINDERHAUSEN to COMMANSTER, thence to VIELSALM. A covering force, under Lieutenant Colonel Boylan, consisting of a medium tank company, a tank destroyer company, and an infantry company, was ordered

to hold HINDERHAUSEN until all other troops had left and then to fall back with maximum delay; they were to take wounded with them. This was a narrow road, and in the event of vehicle failure, vehicles were to be dumped to the side of the road and destroyed with a minimum of delay, so that the column would not be held up.

The 956th and 275th Artillery Battalions were withdrawn the night of the 22d. The 434th Armored Field Artillery Battalion came out just ahead of the covering forces, displacing battery by battery in order to give fire support to the covering forces, which were withdrawing under heavy pressure.

It was providential that on the night of 22-23 December the roads froze, enabling practically all of the vehicles to get out. So far as is known, no men were left behind.

The troops of CCB were originally given instructions to assemble at LIERENEUX, but later other instructions were received and the assembly area was changed to the vicinity of XHORIS. The combat command closed in the vicinity of XHORIS at 232300 December and units were instructed to reorganize, refuel, and prepare for action in the morning.

SUPPLY DIFFICULTIES

It might be well to mention at this point some of the difficulties encountered in the problems of supply and maintenance. This story is well told by Lieutenant Colonel Erlenbusch, Commanding Officer, 31st Tank Battalion:

"We held a supply dump at ST. VITH belonging to the 106th Infantry Division, and used it until it was exhausted (8000 rations and 10,000 gallons of gasoline). Resupply from the rear was extremely hazardous because a goodly portion of the enemy had gone around ST. VITH to the north and south. As a result of these forces 'slipping by' on the flanks, our division rear area was a mixture of friendly and enemy troops. Some Corps and Army ASPs were in our hands; some were in the hands of the enemy; some changed hands frequently; while other supply points were destroyed or evacuated by retreating friendly troops. Division Trains were at LAROCHE, where they were heavily engaged in combat in order to keep from being overrun, and little help could be expected from that quarter. The supply problem then was one of running trucks through miles of enemy-infested territory in search of friendly dumps having the desired type of supplies, and then coming back through miles of the same enemy infested territory to deliver the much needed supplies to the combat elements.

"The service facilities of the units of CCB were pooled, and the maintenance sections were all consolidated under Captain La Fountain, Maintenance Officer, 31st Tank Battalion, who set up a small ordnance shop. Any of our vehicles which could be evacuated to this shop were repaired there. At the same time, this group salvaged many vehicles and weapons which had been abandoned in the area by retreating units before the arrival of the 7th Armored Division. This equipment was repaired, or, if beyond repair, was 'cannibalized' for parts to use in the repair of other vehicles and equipment. Frequently this combined maintenance section operated under artillery fire, and many times they had to drop their work and engage in a small fight with enemy patrols which penetrated to their area. In one instance, a crew of four lost one man before they could withdraw from the scene with their equipment.

"There were two cases which stand out as indicative of the determination and heroic efforts of the service personnel to keep the combat elements supplied. In the first instance, seven trucks of the 31st Tank Battalion, with a corporal in charge of the convoy, set out from the vicinity of KROMBACH to obtain fuel from a dump near SAMREE. As no escort was available, only trucks with machine gun mounts were used. To help protect the convoy, two guards with rifles and 'tommy guns' were placed in the rear of each truck, the guards having been recruited from volunteers among the various company kitchen crews. This convoy was gone for two days and during that time they 'ran the gauntlet' of four enemy ambushes. When they arrived at their destination, they found one side of the dump burning and a light tank company from the 87th Reconnaissance Squadron bitterly defending the other portion. Under these conditions, the trucks were loaded to capacity, and then started on the return trip, hiding out in the woods that night. The next day they had two engagements with the enemy; in one of these attacks the corporal in charge was killed and three men were wounded, while one truck was damaged so badly that it had to be towed the rest of the way. Arriving at KROMBACH at dusk of the second day, now commanded by a PFC truck driver, it could report, 'Mission accomplished.'

"The other case is practically the same story. This convoy was commanded by Sergeant Trapp and consisted of three trucks from the 31st Tank Battalion and one truck of the 23d Armored Infantry Battalion, with a defense crew organized very similar to the first convoy. Their mission was to obtain badly needed ammunition from a dump in the LAROCHE area. Their experiences were about the same; they had two skirmishes and suffered one casualty. The ammunition dump was not guarded by friendly or enemy forces. Like the first group, they too returned at dusk of the second day, reporting, 'Mission accomplished'."¹

The magnificent effort of all service personnel was recognized and appreciated by all troops in the line. In many cases these service troops were called upon to repel enemy attacks. In one action on 21 December, near SAMREE, the combat command Assistant S4, Captain Robert H. Barth, was killed while attempting to maintain the constant flow of supplies to the front.

The supply problems for artillery were especially critical. The only way ammunition supply could be kept up was by hunting for and finding abandoned dumps toward the front. Very little ammunition was getting through from the rear. Some of the artillery trains were with division trains in the vicinity of SAMREE where they were forced to fight for their existence. A balance of ammunition was maintained between battalions; when the expenditures were exceptionally heavy in one battalion, several truck loads would be sent to it from another battalion. On 22 December, ammunition amounted to only a few rounds per 105-mm howitzer for CCB artillery. Any sizable amount of firing had to be approved by the combat command commander.

At one time during this critical ammunition shortage, a German column got lost on the road between OBER EMMELS and NEIDER EMMELS and stopped, bumper-to-bumper, a perfect target for a concentration. When artillery was called for, the ammunition shortage had to be considered. Finally it was decided that this target merited the firing of the remaining white phosphorus. The German column was burned and destroyed. Later, on 22 December, a 90-truck convoy carrying 5000 rounds of 105-mm ammunition finally made its way through after traveling many miles of circuitous routes and back roads. From then on the ammunition situation eased.²

The drivers of the 90-truck convoy, which came through to the combat elements, on 22 December, had been behind their steering wheels for hours on end without sleep. They had driven through ambushes by German patrols and had suffered casualties enroute. Their devotion to duty saved the division and its attached units from almost certain disaster during the ordered withdrawal which took place the next day. Without the gasoline, many vehicles would have to have been abandoned. The artillery and other ammunition they brought held the enemy at bay until the SALM River was crossed.

AN INVENTORY³

In retrospect, it is difficult to understand how it was possible for CCB to hold ST. VITH against the overwhelming power and superiority in numbers possessed by the Germans. The German attack was well-organized and the build-up of strength was achieved with great secrecy. The Germans gambled everything on striking a lightning blow and achieving surprise, so that they could knife through while our troops were disorganized and before the latter could be reshifted to set up an effective defense line. During the period the American troops were in ST. VITH, the weather was a strong ally of the Germans, and American planes were not seen for this entire period. One factor that probably caused the Germans to proceed so cautiously was the fact that elements of the 7th Armored Division were in ST. VITH at all on the 17th when their intelligence had identified them in the LINNICH area on the 16th. It is supposition, but they must have been surprised, and they must have felt that if these troops could be moved such a distance and be in the thick of the fighting so quickly, other dispositions could be effected as expeditiously.

- 1 From a letter by Lieutenant Colonel Robert C. Erlenbusch, Commanding Officer, 31st Tank Battalion.
- 2 From a letter, "Participation of the 7th Armored Division Artillery in ST. VITH Operation, 17-23 December 1944," by Colonel O.M. Martin, Commanding Officer, Division Artillery.
- 3 This inventory represents a summarization of remarks by staff officers (Lieutenant Colonel Charles F. Latimer, Executive; Major Lynn Treece, S2; Major Owen W. Woodruff, S3; Major Evan D. Gammil, S4) of CCB of the 7th Armored Division.

Another factor that gave the Germans pause was the aggressiveness and tenacity of the defense. CCB was not content to dig in and merely try to hold the Germans when they attacked. Their patrols were aggressive, and wherever a weakness was sensed, a probing attack was made. Their counterattacks were quick and effective. Had the Germans realized the limited strength CCB had at its disposal and the disorganization and loss of morale of some of the Allied troops, caused by the initial attack, they could have closed the pincers and annihilated the American forces at their choosing. However, instead of committing their forces to a major blow, they dissipated their strength and lost valuable time in making limited objective and probing attacks.

Defenders of ST. VITH were puzzled at the time as to why the Germans did not pour more artillery fire into ST. VITH. It was only after the third or fourth day that they began firing anything that resembled the intensity of an American barrage. Undoubtedly, they counted on a quick capture of the town and did not want to destroy it or make the streets impassable. As was learned afterwards, in this offensive the Germans were counting heavily on using ST. VITH as a forward railhead.

The arrival of CCB in ST. VITH on the afternoon of the 17th was quite timely. Advance patrols of the Germans were on the SCHONBERG-ST. VITH Road at that time. The only forces to stop them were the provisional engineer troops, and there is no doubt that the Germans could have, and probably would have, been in ST. VITH on the night of the 17th, had 7th Armored Division units not arrived and been placed in position when they were.

It would be very interesting indeed to have a transcript of the conversations between commanders of the various echelons of command of the Germans after their failure to take ST. VITH on schedule, particularly when they discovered the size of the small force that was denying this area to them. The attitude of the German command was well-expressed by a German lieutenant colonel who, while he was attempting to interrogate one of our men who had been captured, remarked: "You and your damned panzer division have kept us from getting to LIEGE!"

Every officer and man of the 7th Armored Division who participated in the ST. VITH action, sings the praises of the 275th Armored Field Artillery Battalion. This VIII Corps Artillery Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Clay, chose to stay and fight. The coolness and the poise of the officers and men in this organization were the subject of admiration on the part of all who came in contact with them. The battalion reflected the excellent training that it had received, and the missions that it was called upon to fire were always fired effectively. The forward observers were outstanding in cooperating with front-line commanders of CCB. Six forward observers were lost during this action.

One of the more critical moments in the defense of ST. VITH occurred on the night of 20-21 December, when the Germans finally penetrated the defense and isolated some of CCB's troops. These troops had been constantly engaged since their commitment on the 17th, and the nervous tension and fatigue produced by the constant pressure under which they were operating was beginning to tell. Combat fatigue casualties up to this time had been light, but with the Germans pouring through, the "men" were rapidly being separated from the "boys." One of the former was First Sergeant L. H. Ladd of Troop B, 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron. This troop had gone into the line on 17 December with six officers and 136 men. When it was cut off to the east of ST. VITH on the night of the 21st, Sergeant Ladd brought back about 46 men, which was all that remained of the troop. Unshaven, lines of fatigue showing on his face, his eyes bloodshot, he nevertheless demanded to see the combat command commander. Staff officers tried to dissuade him and told him to get what little rest he could before the remainder of the troop was committed again. Sergeant Ladd would have none of this and repeated his demand to see General Clarke. Along about midnight he found the general and said, "I want to get it from you personally that Troop B was ordered out of the position that we were holding. Me and my men had decided that we were not leaving and I just want to get it straight that we were ordered out by you." When General Clarke assured Sergeant Ladd that he had issued the order, the Sergeant was satisfied and moved out into the darkness and rain to occupy a new position in the defense line west of ST. VITH.

LESSONS

1. *Flexibility.* Although the units of CCB were mixed as they were placed in the line of battle and troops were frequently moved from one command to another, an effective fighting force was established and maintained. An armored division trained to work in an ever-changing tactical situation will not find itself in confusion when the exigencies of battle require its employment in unusual situations.

2. *Mobile defense.* Until the final day of the defense of ST VITH a mobile reserve was maintained to move quickly and deal with any attack or penetration. At times this reserve struck the enemy before his attack was even fully launched so that the attack became disorganized and was stopped. In a mobile defense, particularly against a force of superior numbers, the reserve must be mobile and it must carry out its mission with aggressiveness.

3. *Elastic defense.* Even though the line to be defended was long, the defensive setup remained elastic and plans were constantly in mind for continuing the defense in the event that forward elements were overrun.

4. *Liaison planes.* The absence of liaison planes for artillery and other observation at ST. VITH was keenly felt. This equipment is of enormous value in the conduct of the defense.

5. *Morale.* Even though the men were operating under the most adverse conditions, including rain, mud, cold, and shortage of food, their response to the situation, when apprised of the importance of the stand, was magnificent. It seemed that the longer the defense held, the higher the morale became. The desperateness of the situation only increased the determination.

It is interesting to note the effect of a personality on the morale of fighting men. While at the front, about the 20th of December, General Clarke told a first sergeant that word had been received that General Patton was attacking the south side of the BULGE. The sergeant, who had been with the Third Army during its sweep across France, replied with confidence and affection, "If Georgie's coming—we've got it made."

6. *Coordination and cooperation.* The defensive stand at ST. VITH was made possible only through the closest cooperation and coordination within the combat command itself and by the combat command with elements on the flanks. Because of the ever-changing tactical situations, commanders were often forced to work out solutions which ordinarily would have been accomplished on a higher echelon. The fact that all units worked together smoothly, even under the most adverse conditions, is evidence of the spirit of cooperation and coordination which prevailed. The academic problems of "attached," "in support," or "operational control," and the like, never arose.

7. *Leadership.* In this type of defensive action, leadership, even though more difficult than in other situations, is a primary prerequisite. When men are faced by odds which seem overwhelming, and other units are pulling out to the rear, only the highest type of leadership will prevail. To regroup men who have once been overrun by the enemy and to make another stand against the same enemy is a challenge of the utmost proportions to the leadership of any unit. These things were done by the commanders of large and small units who were charged with the defense of ST. VITH.

8. *Withdrawal.* It was apparent two or three days before the actual withdrawal that the defenders, if not reinforced, would either have to withdraw or they would be destroyed. At that time, without any appreciable display of activity, a route was reconnoitered and improved with engineer and artillery details. The withdrawal when finally ordered was orderly even though it was carried out under heavy pressure and was started with a minimum of oral instructions to unit commanders through liaison officers. Time for its final planning was short although such a possibility was envisioned for some time and disposition of nonessential vehicles made accordingly. Despite adverse conditions, an armored unit employing a small covering force is capable of breaking off contact with the enemy. The ability to do this successfully, however, is dependent upon the absence of enemy tactical air.

9. *Summary.* Armor is generally thought of as an offensive force. However, its capabilities on defense are great. It conducts an aggressive and an elastic defense. It "rolls with the punches." It seeks opportunities to strike when the enemy leaves an opening. It trades terrain for time and tactical advantage, and in so doing makes the enemy pay heavily for the gains which he makes. Finally, it disengages and strikes again from a new direction.

BACK TO ST. VITH

The following message from the 7th Armored Division commander, General Robert W. Hasbrouck, was read to the men about 4 January 1945.

"To the Officers and Men of the 7th Armored Division

"Since it is impossible for me to talk personally to each of you, I am taking this method of bringing to your attention some of the things I want you to know.

"First of all, I want you to know that the German attack has been disrupted and their plans upset. This division, by its gallant action in denying the important road center of ST. VITH to the enemy for more than five days contributed greatly towards upsetting Van Rundstedt's carefully planned schedule. General Eisenhower and our old friends, the VIII British Corps, have telegraphed us their congratulations. These messages will be read to you later.

"Secondly, we are resuming the offensive. On January 3d, the XVIII Corps (Airborne) to which we now belong, resumed the offensive by attacking south. We are in Corps Reserve and may be called upon at any time to add our power to the attack. This attack may help to shorten the war by many months. If the German forces to our south are cut off by the power and speed of our drive, the enemy will have suffered an overpowering defeat.

"Naturally there will be obstacles to overcome. The Germans will fight savagely to avert defeat. We must fight even more savagely, knowing what is at stake and remembering the American prisoners who were shot down in cold blood by the Germans at STAVELLOT and MALMEDY. German paratroopers may be dropped in our rear; Germans in American uniforms may infiltrate our lines. This will necessitate unceasing vigilance by all troops, wherever located, to prevent sabotage and espionage. No matter how many parachutists come down in any one area, there will always be a far greater number of our troops in the vicinity who can be concentrated quickly against them.

"The terrain we may expect to encounter is not good tank terrain, but when have we ever had good tank terrain? By will power, muscle power, American ingenuity, and just plain guts we will get over roads and trails considered unfit for tanks and thus surprise the enemy.

"Last but not least, I want you to know that I am proud of the division. Thrown into combat piecemeal as you arrived on the scene, every unit and every man performed magnificently. God bless you all, and may 1945 bring the victories you so richly deserve."

The 7th Armored Division was sent into the fight northwest of ST. VITH as the Allies resumed the offensive, and the Germans became the defenders of the town. The same German artillery officer (Lieutenant Behman) quoted before had this to write in his diary as the Americans approached:

"20 January: I am ordered to organize a defense in ST. VITH. For the first time since Christmas, I'm in ST. VITH again. The town is in ruins, but we will defend the ruins. We expect the attack on ST. VITH. Only small forces are available for the defense. The '8-balls' in the unit speak of a little Stalingrad.

"21 January: There are no new messages. The battle noises come closer to the town. We can already see the infantry in some of the heights. I am organizing everything for a last defense. Rumor has it that the Tommies (?) have the town surrounded. Some even believe it. At higher commands they believe that we will be forced to yield. These rear echelon men! I am neither optimistic nor pessimistic and I don't give up hope. When the kitchen goes back, I will send all personnel not immediately needed back with it. During the day, it is naturally quiet. Will the enemy surround the town? I'm sending back all my personal belongings. One never knows. I wonder what Heide is doing?

"22 January: Nothing new during the night. At eight o'clock the enemy recommences his saturation fire from the direction of NEIDER EMMELS. — Exactly one month ago, we took ST. VITH."

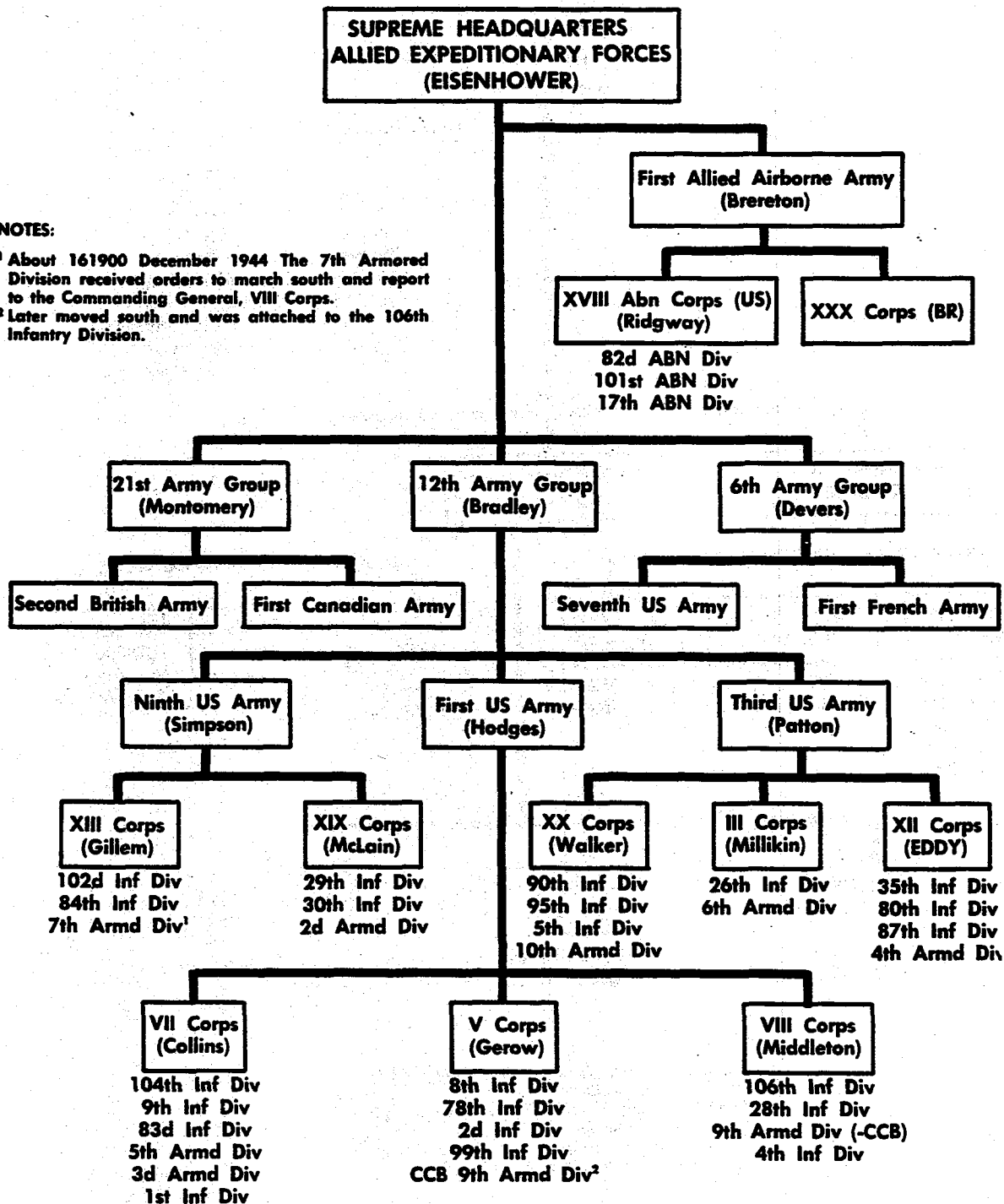
On Sunday afternoon, 23 January 1945, CCB of the 7th Armored Division attacked and retook ST. VITH capturing this German artillery officer and his diary, but that is another story.

**Appendix I
ALLIED ORDER OF BATTLE
(160530 Dec 44)**

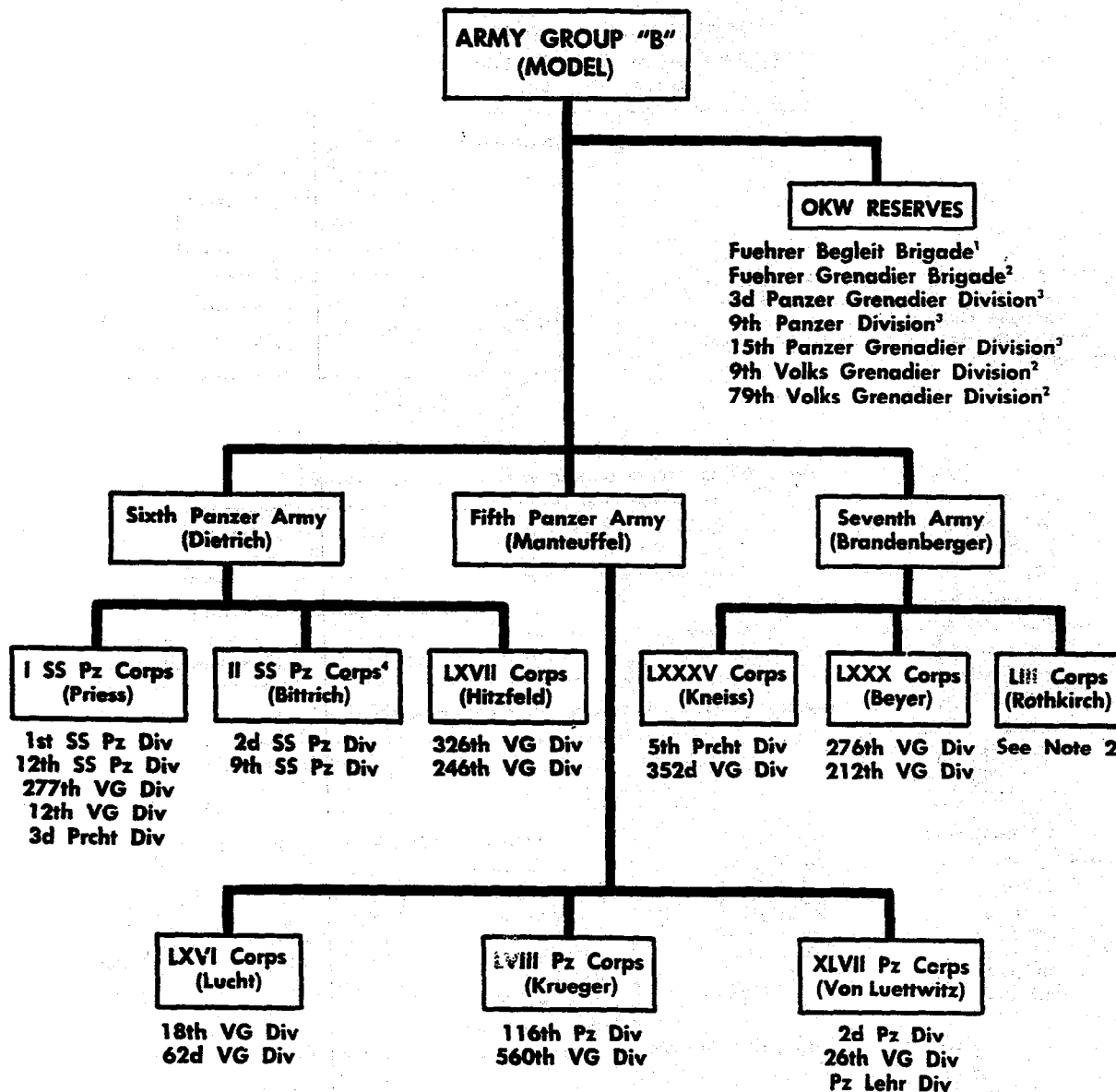
NOTES:

¹ About 161900 December 1944 The 7th Armored Division received orders to march south and report to the Commanding General, VIII Corps.

² Later moved south and was attached to the 106th Infantry Division.



**Appendix II
GERMAN ORDER OF BATTLE
(160530 Dec 44)**



NOTES:

- ¹ Assigned to LXVI Corps on 16 Dec 44 then to LVIII Pz Corps on 23 Dec 44.
- ² After beginning of offensive assigned to LIII Corps (Seventh Army).
- ³ After 24 Dec 44 assigned to XLVII Pz Corps.
- ⁴ Did not participate in the initial attack.

APPENDIX III

TROOP LIST

7th Armored Division

Headquarters and Headquarters Company
Headquarters and Headquarters Company, Combat Command A
Headquarters and Headquarters Company, Combat Command B
Headquarters, Reserve Command
147th Armored Signal Company
87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron (Mechanized)
17th Tank Battalion
31st Tank Battalion
40th Tank Battalion
23d Armored Infantry Battalion
38th Armored Infantry Battalion
48th Armored Infantry Battalion
Headquarters and Headquarters Battery, Division Artillery
434th Armored Field Artillery Battalion
440th Armored Field Artillery Battalion
489th Armored Field Artillery Battalion
33d Armored Engineer Battalion
Headquarters and Headquarters Company, Division Trains
77th Armored Medical Battalion
129th Armored Ordnance Maintenance Battalion
Military Police Platoon
Band

Attached and Supporting Units, 7th Armored Division

203d Antiaircraft Artillery Automatic Weapons Battalion (Self-Propelled)
814th Tank Destroyer Battalion (Self-Propelled)
446th Quartermaster Truck Company
3967th Quartermaster Truck Company
275th Armored Field Artillery Battalion
965th Field Artillery Battalion
168th Engineer Combat Battalion
Headquarters and Service Company, 81st Engineer Combat Battalion, 106th Infantry Division
3d Platoon, Company F, 423d Infantry Regiment, 106th Infantry Division
Headquarters and Headquarters Company, Combat Command B, 9th Armored Division
14th Tank Battalion
27th Armored Infantry Battalion
Troop D, 89th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron (Mechanized), with attached platoons of
Troop E and Company F
Company B, 9th Armored Engineer Battalion
Company A, 811th Tank Destroyer Battalion (Self-Propelled)
Battery B, 482d Antiaircraft Artillery Automatic Weapons Battalion (Self-Propelled)
Company B, 2d Armored Medical Battalion
Company C, 131st Armored Ordnance Maintenance Battalion
112th Infantry Regiment, 28th Division, with attached: 229th Field Artillery Battalion
Company C, 103d Engineer Combat Battalion
424th Infantry Regiment, 106th Division, with attached: 591st Field Artillery Battalion

